

LEARNING FROM FARMBIS
The development, implementation and evolution of
a program monitoring and evaluation framework
A program managers point of view

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Abstract

FarmBis is a nationally based program with a Commonwealth/State component designed to encourage primary producers and land managers to undertake business and natural resource management learning activities. Development and implementation of the FarmBis monitoring and evaluation framework has provided a number of practical lessons applicable to similar initiatives. The paper provides a brief history of the program together with an overview of the program's objectives, strategies, monitoring & evaluation framework, and their evolution. Examples of adaptive management using the framework will be touched upon.

The paper outlines how the experience gained in developing, implementing and refining the FarmBis monitoring and evaluation framework offers a number of lessons in balancing the:

1. collection of process versus impact information – what's desirable, what's possible, and what's needed to achieve a right balance
2. relationship between stakeholder information needs (at a number of scales) and monitoring and evaluation roles and responsibilities
3. use of targets and milestones, and the
4. need for maintaining program integrity while establishing linkages to complementary programs.

Future directions for the framework will also be discussed, these include: improved data management, increasing the knowledge base, encouraging capacity building in monitoring and evaluation, and fostering awareness of national data limitations affecting the assessment of intermediate and long term outcomes.

Key Words: Capacity building, adaptive management, monitoring and evaluation frameworks, intergovernmental evaluation, education and training

1. PROGRAM BACKGROUND

The FarmBis program originated from the McColl Review (1997) which found that the adoption of a continuous learning culture together with an improved management and decision making capacity were integral to the future viability of primary producers. FarmBis is based on the premise that greater participation in learning activities will enable primary producers and land managers to improve profitability and competitiveness, and lead to a greater capacity to implement sustainable agricultural practices. This is supported by the work of Kilpatrick (1995) which indicated that farmers who attend training are more likely to make changes to their practices, and that these changes are associated with improved profitability and viability.

FarmBis is a nationally based program with a Commonwealth/State component designed to encourage primary producers and land managers to undertake business and natural resource management learning activities, and a National component responsible for research into training requirements for primary producers and development of relevant training.

The Commonwealth/State component is delivered in a partnership arrangement between the Commonwealth, States and the Northern Territory, on a matching dollar-for-dollar cash basis. A State Planning Group (SPG) with majority industry representation operates in each State and advises on annual priorities and delivery arrangements. The program has been renewed, with the Commonwealth allocating \$115 million over 3 years (2001-02 to 2003-04) for the new Commonwealth/State component.

The second phase of the program combines the original FarmBis and Property Management Planning (PMP) programs, both of which ended on 30 June 2001. Combining the two programs has raised the profile of natural resource management learning activities under FarmBis, and increased emphasis on the adoption of sustainable natural resource management practices.

1.2 FarmBis Objectives

The objectives of the new FarmBis program are:

1. enhanced capacity of primary producers to identify, plan and access quality learning activities;
2. increased primary producer participation in targeted learning activities;
3. enhanced ability of primary producers to effectively manage change;
4. increased adoption of management practices that lead to greater resource sustainability, profitability and competitiveness; and
5. greater acceptance of the benefits of continuous learning in primary production industries.

1.3 Success of FarmBis

The original FarmBis program was successful both in terms of participation and client satisfaction with:

- a marked growth in participation from 5,485 in 1998-99 to over 67,000 individuals as of June 2001,
- the Roy Morgan Research (2000) Survey of FarmBis Training Participants reporting “high levels of satisfaction in all areas with respondents rewarding FarmBis for their relevant, good value and well delivered farm business management courses”.

2. LESSONS LEARNED IN THE DEVELOPMENT, IMPLEMENTATION AND EVOLUTION OF THE FRAMEWORK

2.1 Development

The key to the success of the framework has been having a nationally agreed monitoring and evaluation framework in place prior to the signing of the Commonwealth /State Agreements. The monitoring and evaluation framework was included as a schedule to the Agreement of both the original and new FarmBis programs, and listed the program's outcomes, success attributes, performance information, data sources, and responsibilities for data collection.

This achievement was assisted by:

- having representatives from each State with technical, program expertise or at least an interest in monitoring and evaluation,
- balancing the need to keep the design of the framework as simple as possible to build confidence and avoid overwhelming partners, against the need for detail to ensure common understanding of the context in which performance indicators would be interpreted. Thus, the original framework emphasised simplicity while the new framework sought to define and focus on fundamental performance questions
- up front Commonwealth agreement to the provision of joint funding for implementation of the framework by the States,
- identification of each party's responsibilities under the framework, and
- enabling further refinement to the framework to occur through a monitoring and evaluation working group with multilateral representation.

2.1 Program Logic Map

An essential component in the development of the framework was the identification of an agreed Program Logic Map (PLM). The original FarmBis PLM was reviewed and five new elements introduced (Figure 1).

The first is the grouping of outcomes according to whether they are of a "Long, Intermediate or Short Term" nature. This was done to ensure that any assessment of whether the outcomes have been achieved is cast in a realistic context. It also serves to draw attention to those outcomes which require long term monitoring initiatives specifically designed to serve the needs of a number of programs with common outcomes.

This was important in the context of the Federal government's performance reporting framework, which places an emphasis on assessing the effectiveness of program outputs in achieving outcomes. It is generally accepted that end-state outcomes are difficult to measure, with those specifically relating to a change in the condition of the natural resource base characterised as being:

- of a long term nature, with observable change often not noticeable during the term of an average program, or even current generation
- difficult to assign causality to the activities of an individual program, and
- subject to the impact of a large range of external factors outside the control of an individual program (eg. environmental, economic, social and institutional).

AFFA is pursuing a number of long term initiatives at this level which will aim to provide benefits across a number of programs. In the interim, FarmBis will aim to establish only a limited causality with the higher order outcomes.

A second element noteworthy in the PLM is a link to related initiatives, specifically the national component of FarmBis, the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality, and industry bodies. This link enables the results of a needs analysis at the regional and industry level to inform the SPG priority setting process, and activities under the National component. In essence it is a means of guiding and monitoring the internal appropriateness of the program.

Thirdly, while the PLM resembles Bennett's Hierarchy it does not specifically identify an intermediate step most commonly referred to as "KASA" – change in knowledge, attitude, skills and motivation. The divergence is consistent with the 2 models of the adoption of new practices commonly identified. The first approach dominated early diffusion and adoption studies of the 1960's and viewed the adoption of sustainable agricultural practices as a technical process whereby a farmer simply adopts a practice following sufficient exposure to it. The second approach views the adoption of new practices as a continuous rather than a discrete process, with farmers operating as individual agents within their own social, economic, structural and environmental paradigm (Barr, *et al*, 2000).

FarmBis is based on the latter model, and as a result the PLM does not reflect a change in attitude, motivation and in some instances possibly even knowledge and skills as the outcome of participation in a single training event. Rather emphasis is placed on identifying the factors affecting adoption and how they can be dealt with. Added to this is the desire to achieve a balance between monitoring those outcomes which are most meaningful against those which are most practical to measure.

Fourthly, the PLM places greater emphasis on the adoption of continuous learning behaviour, by including it as an intermediary step in the hierarchy. And lastly, the PLM explicitly identifies impediments to the achievement of outcomes, enabling us to identify opportunities for research on these issues, specifically through the National component of the program and through alliances with other programs.

Under the PLM the Commonwealth monitors the overall effectiveness of the strategies through participant and industry surveys, and an annual review of the States' performance. Quality control of individual outputs (ie. individual training providers and coordinators) become the primary responsibility of the State.

Within this context, a greater emphasis has been placed on:

- improving documentation of SPG priorities and policies to assist with the interpretation of performance indicators,
- clarifying which outputs fall under each strategy, thereby enabling a better cost benefit analysis, and
- developing common definitions (eg. to assist in tracking the impact of subsidies on hourly training costs).

2.2 Implementation

In the early stages of FarmBis a few key activities assisted in implementing the framework. Database development was driven by both the information needs defined in the framework, and the Information Technology (IT) capacities of the program managers using it. A strong emphasis was placed on ensuring program managers did not become captive to technology in being able to access and manipulate the data. In addition, the Commonwealth offered

technical expertise to the States, through the provision of common input screens and IT expertise to assist with database development.

The ability to demonstrate the early successes of the framework was also important, particularly in the early stages of database implementation when it seemed to the States that they had assumed the major impost of reporting. The Commonwealth was able to provide the results of quarterly database reports, first annual follow up surveys, and industry surveys to the States and SPG. As a result, information was timely enough to build stakeholder confidence in the program and enable adaptive management to occur prior to the mid-term review.

2.3 Evolution

The framework has evolved in its understanding of where the emphasis should lie in data collection, and the impact of intergovernmental agreements on the development and implementation of monitoring and evaluation frameworks and performance targets.

A criticism of the previous framework was that it has leaned more heavily on process rather than impact assessment. We would agree with that assessment, noting that it has been caused by the:

- long term nature of some of the outcomes,
- lack of suitable methodologies and baseline data against which to assess intermediate outcomes – such as the adoption of behavioural change, and the
- need to concentrate staff resources on the satisfaction of immediate information needs.

The approach was also consistent with the maturity level of the program. As the program moves into its second term, greater emphasis is being placed on the funding of studies to address these issues. It is also worth noting however, that the provision of process information proved critical to the ongoing management of the program and to its mid term evaluation. Further, a review of the previous framework and its data requirements has led to only a few data points being deleted on the basis of limited usage.

Based on Rieper & Toulemonde's (1997) models of intergovernmental evaluations, the FarmBis framework lies somewhere between the "Partnership approach" and "Coordinated evaluation – led by the Federal level". The design of the monitoring and evaluation policy and its evaluation framework was multilateral, with the federal level coordinating the process and unifying activities across the country. State comments were actively sought and integrated during the development of the framework and the findings of the mid term evaluation.

However, the following downsides of a multilateral process also had to be dealt with:

- there was pressure to remove controversial/sensitive issues,
- timelines could extend due to the wrong players being involved, particularly where policy instead of technical expertise was on the panel,
- differing monitoring and evaluation terminology and conceptual frameworks,
- unequal monitoring and evaluation capacities at different levels led to lack of full participation or extended timelines,
- pressure to satisfy individual State's unique data requirements
- the numerical advantage of the States had to be managed to ensure information needs at the Federal level were also satisfied.

To a large extent these problems were overcome with: a greater understanding of data requirements and how data would be used, an increase in trust between the parties, individual states becoming champions of particular issues, an increase in expertise over time, and a commitment to sharing data collecting responsibilities among the levels of Government. Negotiations on the second version of the monitoring evaluation framework were greatly assisted by the common understanding that had been obtained through the first program.

Performance management frameworks commonly encourage the identification of performance targets. There was however an initial reluctance at both the Federal and State level to adopt targets on the basis of poor baseline data. It was therefore agreed that target setting would occur annually following a review of program performance during the previous year. The ensuing years have seen targets and milestones adopted as an internal management tool for the SPG, with targets assigned against short and intermediate outcomes capable of being achieved during the life of the program. This approach has avoided the common pitfall of targets, namely the setting of targets which are known to be easily achieved or indeed already achieved.

It is worth noting that performance targets continue to be requested by the Department of Finance and Administration, causing concern at the Federal level as it is uncertain what the intended use is: as a basis for encouraging adaptive management or funding withdrawal. Adaptive management requires good performance information, a good decision making body, and the confidence to engage in transparent decision making.

3. FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR THE FRAMEWORK

We are now in the enviable position of being victims of our own success. Active efforts will be required to manage the amount of data coming through the framework. Greater emphasis will be placed on shifting the amount of time program managers devote to data collation/reporting towards data analysis and wider policy use. This will be undertaken by:

- sub contracting data validation and the preparation and distribution of the States /SPG quarterly database reports,
- making the data available for secondary research activities, while satisfying confidentiality requirements under the *Privacy Act 1998*,
- using the data as a tool for building linkages with industry bodies and related policy areas in and out of the Department, particularly in relation to emerging policy issues such as structural adjustment.

The framework will also be used as a vehicle for encouraging capacity building in program monitoring and evaluation at both the Commonwealth and State level. At the Commonwealth level we will be assisting this through a number of communication activities, including in house presentations, liaison with other program areas, and providing greater access to the monitoring and evaluation framework and related projects on the internet.

The framework will also be used to foster greater awareness of current data limitations. Traditional data collection at the national level within the agricultural sector has been directed towards the collection of commodities data and the assessment of economic performance. More recent national efforts have centred on assessing the condition of the natural resource base. Contrast this with the strong emphasis natural resource management

programs place on influencing the management practices of the private landholders responsible for 70% of Australia's freehold and leasehold land. Good program design and monitoring requires data on their current management practices and the factors affecting it.

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Figure 1. FarmBis Monitoring & Evaluation Framework Program Logic Map

OUTCOMES

Long Term

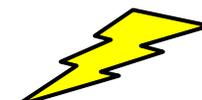
Economic, Social and Environmental Sustainable Development

1. Enhanced profitability, competitiveness and sustainability of farm and fishing business enterprises (*Objective 4*)
2. Enhanced sustainable use and management of Australia’s natural resources (*Objective 4*)

Intermediate Term

Behavioural Change

3. FarmBis participants incorporate the outcomes of education & training activities which are appropriate to their business & natural resource management practices (*Objective 4*)
4. Adoption of Continuous Learning Behaviour: FarmBis participants engage in ongoing skills development and continuous learning behaviour (*Objectives 2 & 5*)



Barriers:
Economic
Environmental
Social
Institutional

Satisfaction of Identified Education & Training Needs

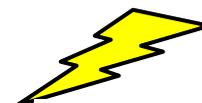
5. FarmBis supported courses reasonably meet the identified education and training needs of FarmBis participants and the identified priorities and needs of specific industry organisations, regional groups, and Governments (*Objectives 1 & 3*)

Continuous Learning Loop

Short Term

Increased Participation

6. Increased participation by primary producers and land managers in targeted education and training activities (*Objective 2*)



Barriers:
Cost
Relevance
Delivery mode
Time / Location

Increased Awareness

7. Increased awareness by primary producers and land managers of:
 - the benefits of continuous learning (*Objective 5*)
 - their education and training needs (*Objective 1*)
 - learning opportunities & assistance measures available through FarmBis (*Objective 1*)

STRATEGIES (Outputs)

- A. Subsidy
- B. Coordination system
- C. Training provider quality control
- D. Communication campaign
- E. Structured process for identification of individual learning needs
- F. Reference tools on FarmBis education and training activities and providers
- G. Monitoring & evaluation arrangements
- H. Integration with related Commonwealth, State & Industry activities
- I. Analysis and feedback of education & training needs

INPUTS

- Administration – effectiveness and efficiency
Funding distribution towards strategy components:
- Subsidy
 - Coordination
 - Communication