

GROW GREAT AG-VOCATES

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Using experience from two ag-vocacy groups to identify and share success tips.

BACKGROUND

Membership of conventional agricultural organisations has declined for decades. In 2003 the Victorian Farmers' Federation claimed 3129 voting members. In 2020 it reported 1141 members¹. NSW's United Farmers & Woolgrowers Association and the Graziers' Association collectively had 28,000 members in 1973. In 1996 the NSWFA's membership was 13,000-14,000.²

Meanwhile, agriculture has seen the rise of alternative groups (agvocates) "rural people experimenting with alternative political avenues such as new 'populist' movements, rural summits and social movements such as Landcare and Women in Agriculture ... reclaiming a form of local governance that is firmly anchored to rural peoples' experiences and identities."³

SUCCESSFUL AG-VOCACY GROUPS

This study examines two successful groups of different geographies, scale and scope, drawn from working in both groups between 2008 to 2019 across Gippsland and from Southern Cross University, Lismore, NSW.



AGI hosted the 2010 launch of Gippsland RDA.

1. Established in 1997, **Agribusiness Gippsland Inc (AGI)** aimed to boost prosperity and sustainability in regional farming and its dependent communities. A not-for-profit leveraging funding from government, it extended annual funding from six local councils to nine – totalling about \$40,000/year and grew stakeholder numbers from < 100 to 10,000+. In eight years to 2016 it transacted more than \$1.5m in funding. In 2019 it transitioned into Food & Fibre Gippsland.

2. The **Farming Together Program (FTP)** offered 28,500 primary producers advice and funding for collaborative and co-operative structures. It exceeded government-set targets by 340%. Across 12 months, production values increased by >\$20m, targeted farm household incomes rose by \$14m and 131 full-time equivalent jobs were created. Further funding of \$200,000 was awarded in 2017, and \$500,000 in 2019.

¹ Report to the Federal Government Registered Organisations Commission

² Halpin, D & P Martin 1999 'Farmer Representation in Australia: Avenues for Changing the Political Environment', National Council of the Institute of Public Administration, Australia

³ Halpin, D & P Martin 2002 'Representing & Managing Farmers Interests', Sociologia

FTP scored a 2019 national engagement award from *The Australian Financial Review*.



REPORTING: Both groups openly declared total membership/stakeholder numbers. AGI publicly updated stakeholder totals every three weeks and FTP was subject to an independent external MERI process.

REFRAMING: They reframed issues, eg: many agricultural co-operatives are locally focussed, so FTP contextualised this as a 'locavore' discourse. And AGI secured funds from a Victorian Justice Department, for farm tours showcasing career options to urban youth disproportionately represented in crime data.

NETWORKING : Both groups were multi-sectoral and appealed to a variety of actors, engaging them in a way that single-industry groups could not match. Both learnt from the Landcare model, seeking participant diversity, structural autonomy and grassroots commitment.

LOBBYING: Neither shied from targeting policy and public officials. AGI successfully argued for Macalister Irrigation system upgrades while FTP backed the 2017 Hammond Review allowing co-ops to capital-raise. In both cases, the groups assembled data and public support to secure political response.

LEADERSHIP : FTP and AGI were headed by focused and remunerated staff, not volunteers or staff on secondment. Both executive heads reported to a well-connected, skills-based board/advisory group.

COMMUNICATION: Both groups produced regular, reader-focussed digital and social media offering useful information, rather than promotion, to attract stakeholders and reputation.

VISIONING: FTP worked to KPIs and a strategic plan, AGI worked to a growth plan. Both prepared for success.

CONCLUSION

The factors behind these two successful examples are common, scalable and repeatable. Building these factors into the structural framework of ag-vocacy groups could assist in their performance, impact and longevity.

The highly-successful Mountain Milk Co-op, formed through FTP.

