

Enabling change in family farm businesses

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Summary

The argument of this chapter is that a deep understanding of the family farm business, including its components and their interactions, is critical to designing effective mechanisms for enabling change in Australian agriculture. The process of enabling change, i.e. extension, needs to address the *needs* of the *right* people, at the *right* time. This chapter presents a model that conceives family farm business behaviour as the outcome of the interactions between the family, the natural resources which are farmed, and the farm business, all within a broader social, economic and political context. A service brokering model which incorporates this approach is proposed as an alternative to the current ‘product-push’ model of past and current extension practice.

Introduction

Family farming has been and still is the backbone of Australian agriculture. Since settlement, family farm businesses have prevailed in the face of ongoing and repeated threats to their survival: fire, drought, environmental degradation, declining terms of trade, debt, the technological treadmill, declining social status, reduced services in rural communities, and market domination of multi-national processors, distributors and retailers (Vanclay and Lawrence 1995). According to many theorists from a range of disciplines, however, family farm businesses exposed to these kinds of forces are unlikely to survive. Yet despite this prognosis, most Australian farm businesses – large and small – continue to be owned and managed by families. While it is difficult to obtain precise figures, and they vary by commodity, it is likely that family farming exceeds 90% of all farms (Gray and Lawrence 2001; Vanclay 2003).

Australia’s family farm businesses operate within an advanced industrialised agricultural system. The industrialisation of agriculture over the last century has led to massive changes in the social and physical structure of agriculture. This process has included mechanisation (e.g. tractors, harvesters and irrigation), chemical farming (e.g. fertilisers and pesticides), and food processing (canning and freezing). These activities have allowed the penetration of industrial and financial capital into the agricultural production system through, for example, the provision of credit, the supply of farm inputs, and vertical integration. As such, farm businesses are a small part of a larger food system which encompasses all aspects of food production, from the supply of agricultural inputs, through on-farm production, to food processing, distribution