

## **Expanding pulse production through extension - Pulse Check discussion groups**

Prudence Cook<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Birchip Cropping Group

The '*Building capacity, skills and knowledge for the pulse industry in the Southern Region: Supporting expansion of high value pulses into new areas and ensuring sustained profitability of all key pulse crops in existing areas*' project is funded by the Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC). The project started in August 2017 and will conclude in March 2020.

The purpose of this investment is to realise the potential long-term farming system and financial benefits of pulse crops in the Southern Region through targeted expansion of pulse crops into new areas while fostering sustainable intensification of pulse crop production in existing areas.

The project aims to improve the skills and knowledge of growers and advisors in the southern region in relation to profitable pulse crop production and agronomy, allowing them to exploit the systems and financial benefits of pulse crops in a sustainable manner. At the project's completion, growers and advisors will have improved confidence in the agronomic management of key pulse crops for their sub-region; an awareness of the major risks associated with production; and appropriate management strategies in place to mitigate risks identified.

A core component of this project is the establishment of 'Pulse Check' discussion groups. These groups have been established in areas where pulses, in particular chickpea and lentil, are not commonly grown and where grower and advisor knowledge of pulse production may be limited. The groups are designed to share learnings (experienced pulse producers and advisors are invited to participate) and address key concerns and constraints to pulse production at the local level, so that future research, development and extension activities can be tailored to local needs.

Twelve groups have been established extending from the Eyre Peninsula to north-east Victoria. Each group is facilitated by a local representative (agronomist, consultant or farming systems group personnel) and meets four times a year. Meetings coincide with the pre-sowing, early post-establishment, pre-canopy closure and pre-harvest periods for each area.

Prior to each round of meetings, facilitators participate in a 'train-the-trainer' webinar with renowned pulse experts so that they can be upskilled in core components of pulse production. Facilitators then design their meetings according to their group needs. Some groups have also taken bus trips to more established pulse areas to learn from long-term growers and local experts.

A key component of the project is the establishment of a local trial site (a complementary GRDC investment). The Pulse Check group have input into trial design and visit the site throughout the season, enhancing their learning through these local trials.

Detailed evaluation of participant practice change will be collected at project completion. The project will also deliver a series of participant case studies and an analysis of the financial risk associated with pulse production in these new, non-traditional pulse areas.