

**Facilitating the
development of the
Australian chestnut
industry**

Brian Casey
Chestnut Growers of
Australia Ltd

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CH03001

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**FACILITATING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE AUSTRALIAN
CHESTNUT INDUSTRY**

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CH03001

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Media Summary

The Chestnut Industry in Australia is a small industry, with annual production of approximately 1200 tonnes fresh product. Most growers (about 80%) are located in NE-Victoria, with other growers located in NSW, Tasmania, SA and WA. Small quantities of product are exported and there is a fledgling processing industry. Production currently outstrips demand and production is predicted to show further increases in the future. Faced with the prospect of declining viability the peak industry body, The Chestnut Growers of Australia (now renamed Chestnuts Australia Inc) saw a need to address these issues and proposed the employment of an Industry Development Officer (IDO) to facilitate the overall expansion and development of the industry. It was envisaged that the IDO would play a key role in

- Providing a clear mechanism for the transfer of information and technology to the industry
- Monitoring and providing guidance on aspects of a quality control framework
- Assisting the Chestnut Industry Advisory Committee (IAC) in its interactions with HAL and other industry stakeholders

Overall the chestnut industry has benefited from having an IDO; communication strategies have been implemented and interactions with a number of stakeholders have been fostered.

Technical Summary

An Industry Development Officer (IDO) was appointed on a part-time basis for a maximum of 72 hours per month to aid the continuing development of the Australian Chestnut Industry.

The IDO was recruited primarily to undertake technology transfer activities including the development and updating of a website, the organisation of industry field days, the publication of a regular newsletter and the oversight of the introduction of a product quality assessment framework. These activities had been highlighted in the Chestnut Industry Strategic Plan 2001-2006 as being important for positioning the industry to cope with the challenges of increasing production and stagnant consumer demand. These activities were also crucial in the up-skilling of growers.

Another important function required of the IDO was to provide support to the Chestnut Industry Advisory Committee (IAC). This was essential to permit the IAC to participate in meetings and deliberations with HAL and other agencies. The importance of this function should not be undervalued, particularly for small industries.

A significant outcome from the project was the development of the website. This has allowed the efficient transfer of information on post-harvest storage techniques, varietal improvement work and processing opportunities to the industry as a whole. Access extends beyond those that belong to the industry association. Other significant outcomes included the conduct of successful annual field days and the production and distribution of newsletters.

Unfortunately, due to changes in the personnel employed within the project, the product quality assessment framework was not developed as fully as initially proposed. This should be addressed in future projects.

A major review of this project was undertaken with the assistance of HAL in the final 6 months of the project life. From this clear guidelines were developed for inclusion in future projects. A model involving the division of the IDO project into two smaller projects will be trialled in 2006/2007.

Introduction

The Australian Chestnut Industry is a small horticultural industry, comprising approximately 300-350 growers. About 80% of the growers are based in NE-Victoria in the Beechworth Myrtleford area, with smaller numbers of orchards in other regions of Victoria, NSW, Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia. Currently about 1200 tonnes of product are harvested annually. Most of this is consumed by the domestic market; only small quantities are exported or processed.

The Chestnut Industry Strategic Plan 2001-2006 noted that production is predicted to increase further due to increased plantings of trees, the reworking of other trees and overall improvement in production techniques. However it was also noted that increased production had already outstripped demand by consumers. The Strategic Plan 2001-2006 considered that in order for the chestnut industry to remain viable it must address this critical issue in a proactive manner. New-value added products, increased exports and increased domestic consumer demand were considered as options that the chestnut industry must investigate if it was to seriously address the problem of how to cope with increasing levels of production.

The Chestnut Growers of Australia, the peak industry body, saw a role for an Industry Development Officer (IDO) in tackling the production level conundrum as well as meeting the industry's vision of 'providing the consumer with a pleasurable eating experience, whilst maintaining economic, environmental and social sustainability'. The IDO would play a central role in industry development and would be involved in the identification of barriers to increased consumer demand, the highlighting of potential value adding opportunities and the oversight of informing growers of 'best practice' techniques. The overall strategy would involve the communication of industry developments by whatever means available including field days, newsletters and electronic resources. The IDO would also have a role in explaining the Strategic Plan 2001-2006 to all growers, and would have responsibility for the implementation of designated elements of the plan. The IDO would also take part in the formulation of the next Strategic Plan to cover the years 2006-2008.

The aim of this project was to ensure that the chestnut industry in Australia was provided with the tools and information necessary to succeed in the face of the challenges facing the industry.

Materials & Methods

An Industry Development Officer (IDO), based in NE-Victoria, was employed for 72 hours per month. The position was advertised in NE-Victorian regional newspapers and interviews were held. Applicants were short-listed on the basis of their skills and experience, with emphasis being placed on communication skills and knowledge of horticultural industries. The position description indicated the Chestnut Growers of Australia (CGA) Board would manage the position.

The key responsibilities of the IDO were identified as being:

- Communication of information to industry members and the transfer of technology to industry
- Liase with industry stakeholders and agencies
- To maintain networks with other horticultural industries to ensure best practise in technology transfer and industry support
- To take a leading role in identifying ways to broaden the scope of the industry from one based on fresh chestnuts to one utilising processing and export options
- To support the CGA Board and the CGA R&D committee to ensure the development of programs based on the Strategic Plan 2001-2006-11-26

To achieve these responsibilities the IDO was required to:

- Develop and maintain the website, including updating of content to ensure that advances in technology were readily available to all growers
- Edit, collate, produce and distribute a regular newsletter (at least 3 per year)
- Organise at least one industry field day each year
- Organise the Annual Levy Payer meeting
- Update the industry data base
- Contact wholesalers and review quality of fresh product consigned to market, identifying barriers to increased volumes of sales
- Act as a contact point for growers, consumers and other industry stakeholders, answering questions or redirecting enquiries.
- Attend all meetings of the CGA Board, preparing all necessary documents including minutes, agendas, financial reports and correspondence
- Represent the industry at all meetings with HAL and any other agencies at the request of the CGA Board
- Provide advice in the development of the new Strategic Plan 2006-2008

Training in the use of the software required for the development and operation of the website was provided. Additional training in other software packages was also provided to take into account changes in technology.

The project was managed by the CGA Board and interim reviews were conducted as noted in the milestones.

A major review of the project was conducted mid-way into year 3. This review was facilitated by HAL and included the CGA Board and CGA R&D committee. Participating HAL members: Richard Stephens, Richard Bennett and Warwick Scherf. Participating CGA members: Brian Casey, John Morton, Ian Paterson, Colleen Dibley, Sam Perna, Percy Rogers, Heather Kane, Erin Powell, Joe Rinaudo and David McIntyre. Notetaker: Tanya Edwards.

Results

Ms Michelle Edwards was appointed to the IDO position at the commencement of the project. Michelle resigned after approximately 12 months in the position and Ms Cathy Croft was appointed. Unfortunately Cathy also resigned after approximately 12 months in the position. At this stage the management committee decide to undertake a thorough review of the project. This review was facilitated by HAL. The review outcomes will be discussed later in this report. In the interim an Office Assistant, Mrs Tanya Edwards, was appointed to support the activities of the IAC. After the review Tanya, who was very capably performing several of the requirements of the IDO, was appointed in this position on the understanding that she would support the activities of the Chestnut IAC and take a leading role in communication activities within the industry. The hours of employment were reduced to 62 hours per month to reflect the changed responsibilities of the IDO.

Each milestone report was submitted to HAL according to the agreement. An analysis of these reports indicates that during the life of the project activities could be classified as follows:

Technology Transfer Activities

- Website development and Updating was an ongoing activity. Initially the domain name ‘Chestnut Growers of Australia’ was registered, and a website was created and material uploaded. Lack of functionality and easy accessibility for uploading required the site to be reworked and a different software background system introduced. This permitted the IDO to readily update the site. Training was provided. A ‘Members Only’ section and ‘Members Forum’ to allow members to access and exchange information and ideas were new features on this site. More recently, difficulties with the domain provider have required further changes. The domain name ‘Chestnuts Australia’ has now been registered and material from the earlier site has been transferred to the new website. Again, additional training was required. The Strategic Plan and summaries of R&D reports are accessible from the website and links to HAL and other agencies have been provided. The website is the main enquiry route used by consumers. Importantly the website reaches beyond Australia and is accessible by international stakeholders.
- Publication of Industry newsletters. Ten newsletters have been published and distributed. These newsletters have also been posted to the website. Two post-harvest reports were included in the newsletters
- Field Days have been held on an annual basis. These provided an opportunity for growers to learn first hand of developments in the industry. Updates from R&D projects including presentations by collaborating scientists, displays of developments in harvesting equipment, displays of developments in post-harvest handling, displays of value added products and a variety of tree management activities were incorporated in the field days Activities were well received and there was good attendance of growers.
- Principle role as the Chestnut Industry Freshcare Coordinator. This was commenced by Michelle Edwards. Michelle worked closely with Freshcare and growers to ensure

training and audit services were supplied to industry in a cost effective and timely manner.

- Visits to wholesale markets to inspect and report to growers on aspects of quality control. Only one market visit was undertaken during the lifetime of this project. Outcomes of this were reported to growers in an Industry newsletter.

Support to Chestnut IAC

- Attendance at regular management committee meetings. These included attendance at R&D committee meetings. Preparation of all documents necessary for the conduct of the meeting were organised by the IDO. At least 8 meetings per year were attended.
- Attendance at two Strategic planning meetings. The IDO ensured that designated projects were completed in a timely manner and provided input to the development of the new strategic plan for 2006-2008.
- Organisation of the Annual Levy Payers meeting and Annual General Meeting of the Chestnut Growers of Australia (later called Chestnuts Australia Inc)

General Activities

- Preparation of annual work plans
- Consumer enquiries
- Potential new-grower enquiries

Discussion

The Industry Development Officer (IDO) project has been a valuable resource for the chestnut industry. At the very least it has provided a focal contact point within the industry. More importantly this project has equipped the industry with the tools to quickly and easily update all stakeholders (growers, consumers, wholesalers, retailers, HAL and other agencies) with changes that are happening in the industry.

The development and updating of information on the website has been a key tool in the transfer of technology to growers. This has yielded a significant advance over previous IDO projects within the chestnut industry. Text and other images are readily accessible. This transition has not been without its teething problems, requiring changes in software and providers, and necessitating training at each revision. Each IDO has mastered the requirements and maintained a website that is functional, active and accessible. Changes to the website can be effected, and new information transferred to industry, at a faster rate than is possible using conventional newsletters. However hardcopy newsletters are still produced, primarily so as not to disadvantage those sections of the industry that do not have access to the appropriate computing facilities. Electronic versions of the newsletter are uploaded to the website.

Other mechanisms have been used to successfully transfer technology to the industry. Annual field days have proved beneficial to both growers and HAL representatives. Presentations by collaborating scientists have been well received, as have demonstrations of grafting techniques, post-harvest storage systems and harvesting equipment. The involvement of the IDO in the quality assurance system, Freshcare, has assisted many growers to cope with compliance legislation and was particularly welcomed by growers from regions beyond the NE-Vic region.

The operation of the Chestnut IAC is dependent on support activities performed by the IDO. While many of these activities (compilation of meeting agendas and minutes, maintenance of financial records, monitoring of Strategic Plan objectives to ensure completion within reasonable timeframes) might be considered administrative tasks, the advantage imparted to the industry in having someone undertake these duties should not be undervalued. In the periods between resignation and employment of a new IDO, the activities of the Chestnut IAC were severely compromised and it became quite apparent that the Chestnut IAC requires ongoing support for these activities.

While there have been a number of successful outcomes from this project, difficulties have also been experienced. During the lifetime of the project it was apparent that, due to changes in personnel and consequent differences in expertise, that some functions were not attended to as thoroughly as initially desired. The monitoring and reporting of parameters affecting quality of product reaching both wholesale and retail markets was one area, based on grower feedback, which was neglected or at the very least, did not receive sufficient attention. This should be given a high priority in subsequent projects.

This project had been running for several years and with the resignation of the incumbent IDO in December 2005 it was considered appropriate to undertake a thorough review of the project. A sub-committee comprising Brian Casey, Ian Paterson and John Morton started the process, and they quickly realised that due to the importance of this project to the chestnut industry, it was prudent to involve the entire Chestnut IAC, effectively the CGA Board, and the expanded R&D committee. This move was timely and coincided with a decision by HAL to review the operation and management of IDO positions in general. A key premise of the HAL review process was to ensure that IDOs produced measurable outcomes. For the CGA it has been a lengthy and difficult

process. At least three meetings or workshops have been held, with the available budget and position requirements being the subject of intense discussion. The Strategic Plan 2006-2008 provided a valuable resource throughout the review.

From discussions during the review it was clear that the limited finances available for the project was a major stumbling block to the attraction and retention of a suitable employee. Also, the scope of this project has proven to be very broad and it was difficult to attract a potential employee with a complete suite of skills, capable of crossing between administrative-type tasks, communication tasks and extension officer tasks requiring horticultural expertise. One possible solution arising from the review was the sharing an IDO with another horticultural industry. In this way expertise could be shared.

One valuable outcome from the review was the development of a clear role statement and position description for an IDO project which could be used in future projects. These could be used to define the project in a more strategic way, even if this meant that ultimately a broad project be sub-divided into smaller, clearly defined projects. This premise led to the development of a model suitable for implementation on the finalisation of the current CH03001 project.

None of this could have been completed without assistance from HAL. The input and understanding from HAL has been crucial to the chestnut industry in developing a project proposal that will commence in the 06/07 period.

Technology Transfer

A summary of the activities undertaken by the IDO/Office Manager in the period from June 06 to mid-November 06 is provided. These activities are typical of the desired requirements that were identified during the review of the project and have been accomplished within the following hours: Mon/Wed 1 – 5 Fri 9 – 1. Total hours per month 62

1. Communication Activities (Technology Transfer)

Event Co-ordination and Administration - Appointed to AGM Sub-Committee 2006 AGM/ALPM/Dinner/Field Day (book venue/2 Motels contacted to hold 10 rooms for potential delegates and kept abreast of bookings/organise lunch caterers(both days)/purchases/payment of all accounts/personally organise catering of morning & afternoon tea(both days)/attendance both days and Dinner)Receipt of money/Issuing of Tax Invoices-Receipt for all attendees/Preparing-Collating *45 AGM packs consisting of Statement of Financial Performance/BB Report/DNA Library/Soil Health Information/Industry Grading Ruler/Lapel name badges/purchase gifts(wrap)/flowers for AGM Dinner presentation

Industry Grading Ruler – Organise for 200 to be produced and printed on, ready for 2006 AGM

Website – 2006 AGM/Dinner/Field Day advised/training at Wodonga to upload items and images/gather all information relevant to update website on new members of Committee and their profile/new contact details/Strategic Plan/BB Report/Best Practice Sheets/News items/Rules of Association/Recipes

Website Enquires – Respond and follow up on 46 website enquiries

Industry Newsletter – write article/gather articles/format/organise printing

Nutgrower Magazine – Advise of Changes to Committee/Positions held/Submit Office article for publishing x 2

2. Support to Chestnut IAC

Agenda's – July/AGM September/ALPM September/September/October – preparation financial reports x 2/Accounts approved for Payment list x 3

Minutes - Committee Meetings – July/September/October

AGM – September

ALPM – September

TOTAL 5

Strategic Plan – July - attend/participate 1 day workshop

Action List – Compile and follow up x 2

2005/6 Audit – Gather and deliver all relevant documents for the preparation of the yearly Audit to Accountant

Office Manager Budget - Participate in preparing figures

Accounts & Correspondence:

All Correspondence In & Out Documented

Enter and maintain Quicken Cash Book/MYOB-MYOB refresher training with

Bookkeeper/Entering all new data into MYOB(Customers/Suppliers)

Payment of all accounts

Bank Deposits – Membership Subs/CAI Invoices/2006 Farm Gate Sales Levy/AGM/Dinner/Field Day Payments

Petty Cash –maintaining and recording - Office Petty Cash box

Travelling – Maintaining Excel sheet recording all Office Manager Travel expenses

Reimburse – Farm Gate Sales Levy to participating members (*9)

Logo Competition – Contacted participants several times/contacted TAFE to invite students to participate

Mail Out - Members * 3 (AGM Nomination Forms and Covering Letter) (AGM Registration and Covering Letter) (AGM/ALPM Agenda and Covering Letter)

Mail Out – Levy Payers *2 (AGM Registration and Covering Letter) (AGM/ALPM Agenda and Covering Letter)

Mail Out - Membership Renewal – label/fold/collate *112 Renewal Notices/Pest & Disease Analysis Questionnaire and Membership Drive Covering Letter

New Member Packs – compiling and posting out of new member information *15

Membership Drive – Organise extra 20 copies of the Nutgrower magazine/update and change existing covering letter and Tax Invoice for 06/07 year/make up 20 new member packs containing – 1 *Industry Grading Ruler/6 Recipe cards/3 A4 sheets/Chestnut Annual Industry Report/Best Practice Protocol Sheet & Explanatory Notes/1*Nutgrower/Levy Revenue Service Letter - collated into plastic wallets

3. Other Activities

Complete TAFE Course – Basic Excel

Internal Office Controls – Attend afternoon workshop-Myrtleford Chamber of Commerce

Change of Business Name – 30th June 2006

Advise all relevant Businesses/Contacts of change (most requested this in writing) Apply to ATO for Tax File-ABN/Open new Bank Accounts/Current business providers notified of change and ABN/Purchase of MYOB

Recipe Cards – Maintain Excel sheet on outgoing Recipe cards picked up or posted from the Office

Recommendations

Small industries such as the Chestnut Industry need support in the form of an Industry Development Officer (IDO). This type of project provides a focal point for the industry and an effective means of transferring information to all sectors of the industry.

A certain amount of flexibility within the guidelines is required from HAL in support of IDO positions for small industries. This flexibility has been extended to the Chestnut Industry and the industry is grateful.

The Chestnut Industry must be prepared to make changes if the IDO project is not working. Assistance can be garnered from HAL to do this.

The IDO project must be targeted to the strategic direction of the industry. The Chestnut Industry Strategic Plans 2001-2006 & 2006-2008 have provided a clear framework to work within.

Future IDO projects must have a well defined selection criteria and role statement.

Small horticultural industries require assistance from HAL to infiltrate the networks available within other agencies and industries, so as to initiate the sharing of IDOs across horticultural industries.