

## **Final Report**

# **2016 Australian Mushroom Growers' Conference**

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**Project code:**

MU15700

**Project:**

2016 Australian Mushroom Growers' Conference – MU15700

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## Summary

The national industry conference is the highlight of the technical information transfer calendar for the industry. International and domestic keynote speakers present the latest information from around the world to a broad audience of industry members.

Australia is isolated by distance from The Netherlands and the other European countries that are acknowledged by growers around the world to be world leaders in mushroom growing, production and innovation. The conference provided the opportunity to include attendance by international speakers, experts and delegates to build the knowledge of local industry participants.

The conference provided a forum for participants to:

- Network with peers and industry experts;
- Receive updated information on levy funded projects and activities; and
- Access new information to assist industry growth and development and enhance the profitability and sustainability of individual businesses.

The conference project addressed all the mushroom industry's strategic priorities including:

1. Market Growth – via information to assist the growers in leveraging generic marketing initiatives and positioning their businesses to take advantage of growth opportunities.
2. Industry Risk Management – via information that will help growers maintain and grow yields while ensuring that products are safe, environmentally sensitive and produced in a safe operating environment.
3. Industry Capacity Development – via information that helps growers increase their skills and knowledge base and exchange of ideas through networking and technology and information transfer.

The conference was targeted at levy payers, supply chain participants and wider industry participants. Activities included a two-day agenda of selected speakers and a farm visit to Merbein Mushrooms. The overall mix of activities was planned by an Australian Mushroom Growers Association conference organising committee, who built a program based on the interests and needs of the Australian industry.

The conference was widely promoted to industry participants through direct email correspondence and through industry communication tools including the Industry Update e-newsletter and the Australian Mushrooms Journal. This approach not only served to encourage attendance at the event but also ensured wider knowledge of the topics covered at the conference. Key topics were also featured in the Australian Mushrooms Journal Summer Edition to further extend the impact and reach of the conference for those industry participants that were unable to attend. A DVD of the proceedings has been made available to all levy payers to serve as a future reference source.

The key outcomes of the event are to provide a forum for industry participants to receive updated information on levy funded projects and activities and to access other relevant information to assist in future industry development. An evaluation process built into the conference program has gathered information from delegates on the relevance of the content, the potential to implement on-farm change and recommended content for future events.

#### 4. Keywords

Mushrooms; conference; event;

## Introduction

The 2016 AMGA Mushroom Industry Conference was the 42nd industry forum and formed an important part of the industry's technology transfer program. It was held at The Grand Hotel, Seventh Ave, Mildura from 13-15 October 2016.

The event allowed industry delegates to access the latest in technology from around the world which was available via the exhibition area, presentations and through the networking opportunities. This international collaboration still plays a critical role in the technical support of our industry as the Australian industry lacks the size and critical mass to sustain an independent professional technical support service.

The conference, which is now held every two years, is viewed by industry as an ideal opportunity to bring together speakers to address relevant topics in a forum that allows information transfer and discussion.

The program was specifically developed by an Australian Mushroom Growers Association committee to take into account the widest possible interests of the industry. The program that was delivered included a cross section of levy based projects (both off and on-farm) and other information. Topics covered included marketing and market intelligence, the promotion of mushrooms to health professionals, food safety and quality assurance, pest and disease, compost technology, the growth in organics and the practicalities of growing mushrooms organically. (See Appendix 1 for Conference Program.)

At a practical level, the event has traditionally involved on-farm activities, and this event featured a visit to Merbein Mushrooms. This part of the program provided delegates with the opportunity to visit the compost yard, the tunnels and the growing rooms. The unique picking operation used on this farm was also of high interest to delegates.

The conference project addressed all the mushroom industry's strategic priorities including:

1. Market Growth – via information to assist the growers to leverage generic marketing initiatives and position their businesses to take advantage of growth opportunities.
2. Industry Risk Management – via information that will help growers maintain and grow yields while ensuring that products are safe, environmentally sensitive and produced in a safe operating environment.
3. Industry Capacity Development – via information that helps growers increase their skills and knowledge base and exchange of ideas through networking and technology and information transfer.

## Methodology

The conference project was undertaken in a way to maximise the benefit to Australian mushroom growers and the wider industry. The direction of the conference agenda was determined by the Australian Mushroom Growers Association conference committee. This committee comprised a cross section of AMGA members, with many years experience in delivering conference programs.

The committee carefully considered a number of elements to determine the agenda including:

- The feedback from the previous conference on topics of interest;
- Current marketing and research and development projects;
- Availability of key speakers; and
- Suitability of the location for a visit to a mushroom farming operation.

To deliver the program, the committee engaged an events management company, Aim Higher Events, who assumed responsibility for the organisation of the event.

The event was promoted extensively to levy payers and AMGA members to ensure the widest possible attendance. A decision was also taken by the AMGA to waive the registration fee for a single attendee from each farm. This offer was made to encourage participation from farms and also reduce costs where multiple delegates attend from the same business. The event and the registration offer was regularly promoted to the industry through direct mail, the Industry Update e-newsletter and through the Australian Mushrooms Journal. Potential delegates were encouraged to visit the event website <http://www.amgaconference.com.au/> to register and to gain additional information about the program.

This promotional strategy provided the opportunity to continually update industry about the conference and to also provide information on the speakers and the topics being addressed. While not all growers attended the conference, each and every grower was made aware of the event through the industry communication channels. The Spring edition of the Australian Mushrooms Journal carried a summary update of speakers to encourage attendance and extend the reach of this information.

The program was also established as a learning and reflective process for delegates. Time was allowed in the program for presentations (including questions and discussions from the floor of the conference), networking with speakers, sponsors, exhibitors and other delegates, networking functions and for a farm visit to provide first-hand learning experience for delegates.

Delegates were also asked to provide feedback on the conference via an evaluation form. This process allowed delegates to identify information of most interest and to highlight those learnings that could be implemented on-farm. (See Appendix 2 for the Evaluation Results.)

## Outputs

The Outputs of the Project include:

- Delivery of Conference Program;
  - Address by Speakers;
  - Trade Displays;
  - Networking functions; and
  - Farm walk.
- Delivery of Conference materials;
  - CD of proceedings to delegates and all levy payers.
  - Direct contact (mail and email);
  - Website;
  - Industry Update; and
  - Australian Mushrooms Journal.

### ***Delivery of Conference Program***

The Conference program was delivered in an effective and efficient manner. The speakers were all well received and time was allowed for discussion on topics of particular interest.

A high percentage (92%) of delegates ranked the trade displays as interesting, suggesting that the information provided by this aspect of the event was both topical and relevant to industry participants.

The networking opportunities were also well received with 80% of delegates indicating satisfaction with the ability to interact with other delegates and trade representatives.

The Farm Walk event was viewed positively with 81% believing the activities were pertinent to their needs and 79% indicating the visit was valuable for practical applications.

### ***Delivery of Conference materials***

Conference materials were delivered through a variety of communication channels. The target audience of levy payers and industry participants were kept informed through a combination of direct contact, and regular updates on the website, the Industry Update e-newsletter and the Australian Mushroom Journal.

The Journal and the CD were used as a way of encouraging longer term information retention. While delegates were able to hear the presentations and take the opportunity to interact with individual speakers, those who did not attend are able to access the available information, via the Journal or the CD. This approach provides for the wider extension of the information presented at the conference.



## Outcomes

A key outcome of the conference was to provide the opportunity for levy payers and industry participants to be provided with information on levy funded projects and activities and other relevant information that assists in the longer-term development of the industry. The conference also allowed delegates to gain awareness of international developments and take part in valuable networking opportunities with growers, industry and trade representatives who attended the event.

The program that was delivered to delegates achieved this outcome by delivering presentations on a cross section of levy based projects (both off and on-farm) and other information. The topics covered included marketing and market intelligence, the promotion of mushrooms to health professionals, food safety and quality assurance, pest and disease, compost technology, the growth in organics and the practicalities of growing mushrooms organically.

The conference also addressed the issues of delivering practical hands-on information by including a farm walk at Merbein Mushrooms. This part of the program was well received by delegates who indicated that the visit was both pertinent to their needs and valuable for practical applications.

The project was managed in a way that also addressed the issue of non-attendance by levy payers and industry participants. Care was taken to ensure that the preliminary information was made available to all levy payers to encourage attendance.

In the lead-up to the conference, more details on the event and the topics addressed was also included in industry communication channels including the Industry Update e-newsletter and the Australian Mushrooms Journal.

At the conclusion of the event, information was made available to levy payers through a CD of the conference materials and through feature articles in the Australian Mushrooms Journal. This approach provided for the widest possible extension of the information delivered at the conference.

In an overall sense, the conference achieved its key outcomes, providing valuable information and networking opportunities for levy payers and industry participants. The management and supply of information to all levy payers (including those who did not attend the conference) ensures that the conference served as a longer term information source, increasing the value to industry of this type of project.

The ability for levy payers to interact directly with researchers in this type of forum should not be underestimated. The discussions arising from the conference have the potential to assist the development of new research and activities with long-term benefit to the industry.

## Evaluation and discussion

The 2016 AMGA Mushroom Industry Conference was held successfully, with positive feedback received from attendees as part of the assessment process. From the viewpoint of delegates, the event provided the opportunity to hear from speakers on the main topics (both levy funded and non-levy funded) and to access information on the latest technology via exhibitions, presentations and networking opportunities.

As outlined previously in this report, the program was specifically developed by an Australian Mushroom Growers Association committee to take into account the widest possible interests of the industry. This process used the experience of committee members to deliver a program that met industry requirements.

The experience of the event management company in delivering previous conferences also provided the opportunity to implement a promotional process that maximised attendance and provided information to those levy payers and industry participants who choose not to attend. The past experience of the committee and the event management company ensured that the overall program was a learning and reflective process for delegates.

The conference delivered a program that included a cross section of levy based projects (both off and on-farm) and other information. The topics covered marketing and market intelligence, the promotion of mushrooms to health professionals, food safety and quality assurance, pest and disease, compost technology, the growth in organics and the practicalities of growing mushrooms organically. The event also featured a visit to Merbein Mushrooms, providing delegates with the opportunity to visit the compost yard, the tunnels and the growing rooms. The unique picking operation used on this farm was also of high interest to delegates.

The process of delivering the conference used feedback on past events to refine the delivery of the event, and the topics presented. A direct feedback process was also built into the conference, allowing immediate evaluation of the conference.

The findings of the feedback survey included:

- Promotion of the event through direct mail, Journal and Website worked well with 75% of attendees nominating those communication channels as the way they found information about the conference;
- The majority (93.5%) of those attending nominating that they did so to gain knowledge and take advantage of networking opportunities;
- The farm walk activities were pertinent to the needs of 81.3% of attendees, with 79.3% nominating the farm visit as being valuable for practical applications;
- When asked whether farm walks should continue as part of a conference program 86.5% indicated their support for this component of the event, with 54% showing support for visits to other agribusinesses as part of a farm walk day;
- A ranking of presentations by content relevance reported a high satisfaction with an average score of 75% across all presentations. The presentation "Conversion to Organics – The Giorgio Story achieved the highest ranking of 82.7%, while the presentation of Hort Innovation Marketing activities achieved the lowest ranking of 60.9%;

- A ranking of the administration of the conference taking into account elements such as the venue, seating, and audio visuals, networking opportunities and conference speakers indicated a high satisfaction with an average score of 78.14%;
- Trade displays were well received with 92% of delegates showing interest in the displays; and
- Regarding overall perceptions of the conference 94% of delegates stated that the conference was either excellent or good.

As part of the evaluation process, delegates were asked to specifically nominate areas addressed by the conference that could be implemented on-farm. The areas identified by this process were:

- Disease management;
- Organics;
- Consumer trends that may impact the supply chain;
- Pest & Disease;
- Testing of the machine that kills airborne stuff in one room;
- Compost project findings; and
- Farm Sampling of pest and disease.

Delegates were also asked which sessions were most beneficial. Those mentioned by more than one delegate included:

- Conversion to organics;
- Economic outlook;
- Lifestyles of health and sustainability;
- Promotion of mushrooms to health professionals;
- Growing organics; and
- Groundbreaking research into composting.

Based on the feedback evaluation received, there is evidence that the program was well received and that delegates gained information that was useful to their business, with elements that could be taken and adopted on-farm. These findings, combined with the approach to further extend as much information from the event to levy payers who did not attend, positions this project as being of high value to the Australian mushroom industry.

## Recommendations

1. That the Conference continue to be scheduled every two years and funded as part of the industry levy R&D program;
2. That the Conference Organizing Committee continue to use the feedback from this conference in developing the topics for the next conference. A list of potential topics suggested for the next event include:
  - Organics from an Australian perspective;
  - Labour Management;
  - An in-depth report into the way the levy is spent;
  - Casing in the future;
  - Activities undertaken by the Australian Mushroom Growers Association;
  - Future Plans;
  - Presentation on growing mushrooms;
  - Compost project - new developments
  - Marketing of Mushrooms;
  - Economic Outlook;
  - New Spawn Strains;
  - Picking Quality;
  - Implementation and cost savings through the use of solar power;
  - Insight into next generation growing facilities such as single layer;
  - Automation opportunities;
  - Post-Harvest Care;
  - Packaging; and
  - Exotic Mushrooms.
3. That the Farm Walk component continues to be part of future industry conferences.

## Intellectual property/commercialisation

No commercial IP was generated by this project.

## Appendices

1. Conference Program
2. Evaluation Results



# **42<sup>nd</sup> Australian Mushroom Growers' Conference**

**2016**

***“Ensuring a Sustainable Future for the Mushroom Industry”***

## ***Program***

**Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> October 2016**

**to**

**Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> October 2016**

Organised by

**Aim Higher Events Pty Ltd**

## Thursday, 13th October 2016

<i>06:30</i> <i>10.30</i>	<i>Breakfast – Chandelier Room</i>
09.00	<b>Exhibition set up – Level 1 Ballroom</b>
10.30	<b>Registration Desk Open – Level 1 Ballroom</b>
<b><i>Farm Walk Day.</i></b>	
<i>12:00</i> <i>13:00</i>	<i>Lunch – The Ballroom – Level 1</i> <span style="float: right;"><i>Elf Farm Supplies</i></span>
13:15	Coaches Depart <span style="float: right;"><i>ChampFood</i></span>
13.50	Arrive at Merbein Mushrooms
14.35	Arrive at Merbein Mushrooms
15.30	Arrive Merbein Mushrooms
16.20	Depart the Farm
17.00	Arrive at The Grand Hotel Mildura
<b><i>Charity Bike Ride Welcome Dinner</i></b>	
18.00	<i>Assemble in the Grand Hotel Reception Area</i>
18.15	<i>Depart for Mildura Wharf</i>
18.30	<i>Board the PS Mundoo</i> <span style="float: right;"><i>Legro</i></span>
19.00	<i>Depart for 3 Hour River Cruise &amp; Dinner</i>
22.00	<i>Arrive back at Mildura Wharf</i>



## Friday, 14th October 2016

07:30 08:30	<i>Breakfast – Chandelier Room</i>	
07:30	Registration Desk Open – Ballroom Level 1.	
<b>Conference Sessions - Chairman – Kevin Tolson</b>		
08:30 08:45	<b>Conference Opening Address</b> <i>Kevin Tolson – Chairman AMGA</i>	
08:45 09:30	<b>The Changing consumer Market</b> <b>LOHAS – the biggest market you’ve never heard of!</b> <i>Nick Bez, Director- Mobium Research</i>	
09:30 10:00	<b>The Future of Pesticides for Mushrooms</b> <i>Kevin Bodnaruk - AKC Consulting</i>	
10:00 10:30	<b>The Future of Food Safety and Quality Assurance</b> <i>Mr Richard Bennett – Fresh Produce Safety Centre</i>	
10:30 11:00	<i>Morning Tea – Ballroom</i>	<i>Scato Plus</i>
11:00 12:00	<b>“Conversion to Organics – The Giorgio Story”</b> <i>Geoff Price – Technical Director- Giorgio Mushroom Company</i>	
12:00 13:30	<i>Lunch – Ballroom</i>	<i>Elf Farm Supplies</i>
<b>Conference Sessions - Chairman – Phil Rogers</b>		
13:30 13:50	<b>Pest &amp; Disease Management of the Future</b> <i>Dr Gordon Rogers - MD Aust Hort Research - USyd re Diagnostic Project</i>	
13:50 14:10	<b>Pest &amp; Disease Management of the Future-Outcomes &amp; Services</b> <i>Dr Lee Smith - Audiagnostics</i>	
14:10 14:45	<b>New On- farm Sampling Techniques for Mushroom Diseases</b> <i>Judy Allan &amp; Warwick Gill</i>	
14:45 15:15	<i>Afternoon tea – Ballroom</i>	<i>Mycologistics</i>
15:15 16:00	<b>AMGA – AGM</b>	
19:00	<i>Sponsors Dinner – The Brewery</i>	

<b>Saturday, 15th October 2016</b>	
<i>07:30 08:45</i>	<i>Breakfast – Chandelier Room</i>
08:00	Registration Desk Open
<b>Conference Sessions – Chairman – David Tolson</b>	
08:30	<b>Economic Outlook</b>
09:30	<i>Nathan Lim - Head of Research for Morgan Stanley</i>
09:30	<b>Mushrooms for Life</b>
10:00	<i>Glenn Cardwell – Nutrition Impact</i>
10:00	<b>Compost Project Report</b>
10:30	<i>Assoc Professor Michael Kertesz - The University of Sydney</i>
<i>10:30 11:00</i>	<i>Morning Tea – Ballroom</i> <span style="float: right;"><i>Amycel</i></span>
11:00	<b>The Practicalities of Growing Mushrooms Organically</b>
12:00	<i>Geoff Price – Technical Director- Giorgio Mushroom Company</i>
<i>12:00 13:30</i>	<i>Lunch – Ballroom</i> <span style="float: right;"><i>Elf Farm Supplies</i></span>
<b>Conference Sessions – Chairman - Mick Surridge</b>	
13:30	<b>HIA Update</b>
14:00	<i>John Vatikiotis - Relationship Manager Lead</i>
14:00	<b>HIA Marketing Update</b>
14:30	<i>Monique Emmi - Marketing Manager</i>
<i>14.30</i>	<i>Afternoon Tea – Ballroom</i> <span style="float: right;"><i>Harte Peat</i></span>
<i>18:30</i>	<b><i>Pre-dinner Drinks (Rose Garden)</i></b>
<i>19:00</i>	<b><i>Farewell Dinner – Ballroom</i></b>
	<i>MC – Mick Surridge</i>
	<b><i>Special Guests</i></b>
<i>23:00</i>	<i>Legro Australia</i>

<b>Sunday, 16th October 2016</b>	
<i>06:30</i>	<i>Breakfast – Chandelier Room</i>

# Australian Mushroom Growers Conference Evaluation Results

A survey was conducted following the conference and the following results from that survey are provided below:

**1. How Did You Find Out About the Conference?**

Direct mail from organiser, journal, AMGA	36.4%
AMGA Journal	22.7%
Attendance at last conference	13.6%
Friends, colleagues, farm owners	11.3%
Conference Home Page/other	15.9%

**2. My Reasons for Attending the Conference**

Needed a break	19.3%
Gain knowledge and networking opportunities	93.5%
Thought I would learn	29.0%

**3. The Farm Walk Activity - The evaluations on this day showed the following.**

All Activities were pertinent to my needs	81.3%
Valuable for practical applications	79.3%

**4. Should we continue with Farm Walks?**

Yes	86.5%
No	5.4%

**5. Should we visit other agribusinesses as part of a farm walk day?**

Yes	54%
No	24%

**6. Presentation Content Relevance - Respondents provided the following satisfaction feedback on the conference presentations.**

Conference Opening	73%
The Changing Consumer Market LOHAS – the biggest market you’ve never heard of	80.7%
The Future of Pesticides for Mushrooms	73.8%
The Future of Food Safety and Quality Assurance	73.6%
“Conversion to Organics – The Giorgio Story”	82.7%
Pest & Disease Management of the Future	77%
Pest and Disease Management Outcomes and Services	69.2%
New on Farm Sampling Techniques for Mushroom Diseases	74.4%
AMGA - AGM	78.2%
Economic Outlook	80.7%
Mushrooms for Life	77.04%
Compost Project Report	79.3%
Practicalities of Growing Mushrooms Organically	82.0%
HIA Update	64.7%
HIA Marketing	60.9%

**7. Administration - Satisfaction with the administration of the conference was provided as follows:**

Venue	68.8%
Onsite registration	84%
Seating, visuals & AV	81.8%
Networking opportunities	80.6%
Conference Admin	81%
Venue Food	76%
Conference Speakers	74.8%

**8. Trade Displays**

- 92% of delegates indicated that the trade displays were interesting.

**9. Conference Overall**

- 94% of delegates indicated that the conference was excellent/good.

**10. On-farm implementation**

Delegates indicated that as a result of their attendance at the conference they would implement the following on-farm.

- Disease management;
- Economic Outlook;
- Organics;
- Consumer trends that may impact the supply chain;
- Pest & Disease;
- Going to test that machine that kills airborne stuff in one room;
- Compost project findings;
- Farm Sampling of P & D; and
- Many things.

**11. Assessment of presentations**

Which Session did you gain most from:

- Conversion to organics (number of mentions);
- Economic outlook (number of mentions);
- LOHAS the reason informative the future (number of mentions);
- Glenn Cardwell;
- Ground breaking research into composting by Michael Kertesz much international interest should have had a longer slot;
- Pest and disease;
- Growing organics (number of mentions);
- Nick Bez;
- Giorgio and the economic update; and
- All of equal value.

**12. Suggested topics for future conferences.**

The following topics/ items were suggested for the next conference:

- Organics with Australian Speakers;
- Labour Management;
- Where is our levy going – in depth report?;
- Casing in the future;
- What is the Association Doing?;
- Future Plans;
- More on Growing;
- Organics;
- Compost – not Bart Driessen;
- Bart Driessen, Ray Samp, Mel Meyers;
- Marketing of Mushrooms;
- Economic Outlook;
- New Spawn Strains;
- Picking Quality;
- How about solar the cost subsidies in countries savings etc?;

- Compost project - new developments;
- Insight into next /gen growing facilities i.e. single layer;
- Automation opportunities;
- Post-Harvest Care;
- Packaging; and
- Exotic Mushrooms.