

Researchers' Extension Program for the Native Foods Industry

A report for the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation

by A.E. Hele

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In submitting this report, the researcher has agreed to RIRDC publishing this material in its edited form.

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Foreword

The Native Food Industry R&D Advisory Group reviews and provides assessments of research proposals on native foods submitted to the RIRDC. Recently the Group has considered that many proposals have shown an imperfect understanding of the current commercial and technical situation in native foods, the crops of interest, previous work and appropriate industry partners.

To address these concerns, an extension program for researchers was conducted, consisting of the production and communication of a native foods bibliography and presentations at the 5th Australian Horticultural Conference on the native foods industry and its research needs and opportunities.

Increasing researcher's awareness and knowledge of these factors and bibliographic resource is likely to improve the efficiency of researchers, industry advisors and RIRDC and other funding agency personnel by better matching research proposals to industry needs, and increase the quality and quantity of research proposals and outcomes.

This report outlines the operation of this extension program, provides feedback on researcher perceptions of the native food industry and makes recommendations on how the industry can help researchers improve the quality of their project proposals.

This project was funded from RIRDC Core Funds which are provided by the Federal Government.

This report, a new addition to RIRDC's diverse range of over 900 research publications, forms part of our New Plant Products R&D program, which aims to facilitate the development of new industries based on plants or plant products that have commercial potential for Australia.

Most of our publications are available for viewing, downloading or purchasing online through our website:

- downloads at www.rirdc.gov.au/reports/Index.htm
- purchases at www.rirdc.gov.au/eshop

Simon Hearn Managing Director Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation

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Executive Summary

To improve the quality and quantity of research into Australian native crops, an extension program was conducted for researchers, consisting of the production and communication of a native food bibliography and presentations to researchers, at the 5th Australian Horticultural Conference, on the native foods industry and its research needs and opportunities.

During the conference, several informal discussion and product examination sessions were conducted with delegates to further inform them of native food R&D needs and opportunities; provide them with information on the industry; assess their current knowledge levels, perceptions and information needs and to seek their views on the likely production and technological potential of some individual crops.

The R&D community encountered during the discussion sessions generally had a limited knowledge of the current status of the native food industry and perceived it as being small-scale, both in terms of production and R&D expenditure, and not being undertaken with, or focussed on, conventional horticultural production technologies. These features were perceived to be a deterrent to the involvement of mainstream researchers or research agencies. The industry should consider the need to further market the industry to the R&D community. In particular, developing and communicating information on industry 'success stories', both in terms of larger-scale commercial production and research projects, could help lift industry credibility and the level of research interest and activity.

Researchers had little knowledge of the research needs of individual native food species and considered the current industry R&D plan provided only general guidance as to requirements and priorities. After examining information on some crops they tended to consider that, as a general rule, species which had a relatively short establishment to harvest timeframes, such as bush tomatoes, mountain pepper and acacias, would be more amenable to plant and production technology improvements from research than longer-period woody perennial species, such as quandongs. Plant and production technology improvements were also perceived as being more problematic in species whose harvested commodity was a fruit, such as quandong, in which product appearance was thought to be a more important, but difficult to manipulate consideration. Given these assessments by experienced researchers, the industry should consider the need to examine the current 'core species' of interest to determine, at least in terms of production technology research, which crops are likely to give an adequate return on R&D investment within a reasonable timeframe. To provide better guidance to researchers, they should also consider examining and detailing specific research needs and priorities for each individual crop, rather than the current approach of generic R&D priorities.

1. Introduction

The Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation provides funding for native foods research under its New Plant Products program and with industry has developed a five year R&D plan for the sector.

Comments on research proposals submitted to the Corporation are provided by a five person Advisory Group, drawn from and nominated by industry participants. Concern has been expressed by the Advisory Group over the quality of many recent funding proposals. Concerns have included proposals which indicate a lack of understanding of the current commercial and technical situation in native foods, the crops of interest, previous work and appropriate industry partners.

To help address these concerns, an extension program for researchers was conducted, consisting of the production and communication of a native foods bibliography and presentations to researchers on the native foods industry and its research needs and opportunities at the 5th Australian Horticultural Conference. During the conference, several informal discussion and product examination sessions were also conducted with researchers to further inform them of native food R&D needs and opportunities; provide them with information on the industry; assess their current knowledge levels, perceptions and information needs and to seek their views on the likely production and technological potential of some individual crops.

2. Methodology

Bibliography

A native food bibliography was compiled, using standard academic paper and electronic based literature search tools, and from examining reference works and the author's professional library resources. The bibliography included papers in refereed scientific journals, published books, extension publications and some unpublished undergraduate and postgraduate theses. Unless the reference included significant previously unpublished information, articles in magazines and newspapers were not included.

This literature search uncovered around 150 references. These references were subdivided into three bibliography categories, reflecting the nature and number of references uncovered. The categories employed were 'General References', 'Acacia References' and 'Quandong References'.

The bibliographies were compiled into tab-delimited text documents, which allows them to be read by word processors and also imported into spreadsheet and database software for enhanced search and sorting functions. They have been made available for download from the Native Food Industry Website (www.nativecrops.com.au/industry).

Conference Presentation

During the 5th Australian Horticultural Conference, organised by the Australian Society for Horticultural Science and held at the University of Sydney from 29 September to 2 October 2002, presentations were conducted for delegates on the native foods industry and its research needs and opportunities.

The presentations covered the current status of the industry and of cultivation, the main species of interest to the industry (the 'core crops'), the industry's R&D plan, RIRDC funding sources and industry information sources, including the recently compiled bibliography.

The presentations were accompanied by several handout publications on the industry and on specific crops.

Researcher Discussions

During the conference, several informal discussion and product examination sessions were conducted with researchers to further inform them of native food R&D needs and opportunities; provide them with information on the industry; assess their current knowledge levels, perceptions and information needs and to seek their views on the likely production and technological potential of some individual crops. The whole range of the industry's 'core crops' were not examined, but rather a representative group, where the author considered he had a greater depth of knowledge and where product samples were at hand for examination. Researcher comments and perceptions were noted and are reported, but were not subject to statistical analysis.

3. Results of Researcher Discussions

Knowledge of Industry

There was a common perception among researchers that the native food industry was totally or largely based on wild harvested supplies and many researchers were surprised that some products were now being sourced from cultivation.

Of the researchers that were aware of native food cultivation, many believed that production was largely undertaken using permaculture/polyculture/faux wild/organic cultivation technologies and that the industry was focused on such systems. As a result many thought that they would have little to offer the industry, as they considered that their expertise and experience was in 'conventional' technologies. They also tended to view the industry as small-scale and thought that most participants were likely to be 'hobbyists' or 'enthusiasts'. They were surprised to learn of and view photographs of larger scale conventional plantings of crops such as bush tomatoes, lemon myrtle and quandongs.

Most researchers had been exposed to some native food products, but few were aware of the category range of processed products currently available or the main processors and their brands.

Knowledge of R&D Needs

Few researchers were aware of the current Industry R&D Plan. On examining the Plan most thought that it provided guidance as to industry requirements, but was short on specific information that would help them assess further industry research opportunities. Many suggested that research priorities along the lines of – *crop X requires selection work to produce varieties with Y characteristics* – would provide a clearer indication of needs and opportunities.

Most researchers were not aware that RIRDC provided funding for native food research. While most suggested that they would investigate further, there was an opinion that the funding amounts available were likely to be small and thus the projects that could be supported were likely to be modest. As one researcher said "*it costs almost as much time and effort to apply for and administer a* \$10,000 project as it does a Million dollar project, and I find it hard to justify such an effort to my organisation's administration".

Crop Potential Assessments

Acacias

Most researchers were aware of food uses of acacias and that the crop had attracted some institutional R&D interest, with ACIAR, CSIRO, CALM WA, and RIRDC mentioned. This institutional interest seems to have given the crop 'credibility' and many researchers considered that, as a result, the plant must have good production potential and could be an attractive research opportunity.

Bush Tomatoes

Few researchers were aware of bush tomatoes. When made familiar with the plant, they tended to believe that the crop could respond to research efforts because of its taxonomic status (many important crop plants, such as potatoes and tomatoes, are also solanaceous); its short period from establishment to cropping, which could favour rapid selection; and the level of agronomic development efforts already undertaken (particularly mechanical harvesting).

Lemon Myrtle

Many researchers were aware of lemon myrtle products. Fewer were aware of the extent of current production. When made familiar with the plant, they tended to believe that the crop would respond to

research efforts because of its relatively short period from establishment to harvest and the simple objective criteria that could be utilised for evaluating management technology and for plant selection and breeding.

Mountain Pepper

Few researchers were aware of mountain pepper. When made familiar with the plant, they tended to believe that the crop would respond to research efforts because of its relatively short period from establishment to harvest and the simple objective criteria that could be utilised for evaluating management technology and for plant selection and breeding.

Native Citrus

Many researchers were aware of Australia's native citrus species, largely due to the plant's representation in several research station variety blocks and the interest that has been shown in the plant in 'conventional' citrus breeding programs. However, few considered that native species held much production promise or research interest in their own right ("*the world is full of citrus species and varieties, does it really need another that is small, seedy and thorny?*").

Quandongs

Many researchers were aware of quandongs and more experienced researchers were aware of early CSIRO work on the plant. However, the perception that resulted from this awareness tended to be negative and along the lines of "*didn't the CSIRO gave up on quandongs? That must mean there can't be much potential.*" When made familiar with details of the plant and its current production status, there was surprise that the plant was being cultivated, but a general perception that a large amount of research would be required to develop the crop, in areas such as variety selection and management of the host-parasite relationship. When examining samples, they often unfavourably compared characteristics such as size, colour, fleshiness and texture to other 'fruit' crops ("*That's what apricots probably looked like a few thousand years ago*").

4. Discussion & Recommendations

The R&D community encountered during the discussion sessions generally had a limited knowledge of the current status of the native food industry and perceived it as being small-scale, both in terms of production and R&D expenditure, and not being undertaken with, or focussed on, conventional horticultural production technologies. These features were perceived to be a deterrent to the involvement of mainstream researchers or research agencies. The industry should consider the need to further market the industry to the R&D community. In particular, developing and communicating information on industry 'success stories', both in terms of larger-scale commercial production and research projects, could help lift industry credibility and the level of research interest and activity.

Researchers had little knowledge of the research needs of individual native food species and considered the current industry R&D plan provided only general guidance as to requirements and priorities. After examining information on some crops they tended to consider that, as a general rule, species which had a relatively short establishment to harvest timeframes, such as bush tomatoes, mountain pepper and acacias, would be more amenable to plant and production technology improvements from research than longer-period woody perennial species, such as quandongs. Plant and production technology improvements were also perceived as being more problematic in species whose harvested commodity was a fruit, such as quandong, in which product appearance was thought to be an important, but more difficult to manipulate, consideration. Given these assessments by experienced researchers, the industry should consider the need to examine the current 'core species' of interest to determine, at least in terms of production technology research, which crops are likely to give an adequate return on R&D investment within a reasonable timeframe. To provide better guidance to researchers, they should also consider examining and detailing specific research needs and priorities for each individual crop, rather than the current approach of generic R&D priorities.

The industry should also consider the mechanisms for maintaining and expanding the bibliographies prepared during this project and for providing an ongoing means of accessing these resources, and other information on the native foods industry. The formation of a national association, with its own website, may be a means to achieve this result.

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