HAVING A FIELD DAY

From showcasing the latest agricultural technology to underpinning the survival of small towns, field days are a vital part of rural Australia.
On a sunny spring day in Borenore, just west of Orange, NSW, people are pouring through the gates of the Australian National Field Days. Cattlemen wander about in big hats, there's a line-up for rice-paper rolls at a Vietnamese food truck and a group of schoolgirls carrying Akubra show bags chats beside a row of tractors. In the distance, the roar of a motorcycle stunt display blends with the thump of rotor blades from a helicopter taking scenic flights over the patchwork of surrounding farmland.

With a mix of entertainment and exhibitors covering everything from tractors to beekeeping, the Borenore event is a shining example of a modern Australian field day. Established in 1954, the event has been held at this permanent site for the past four decades. The organising committee includes full-time staff, as well as a backbone of dedicated volunteers, and the offering has broadened to include spin-off sheep and cattle events in addition to the annual all-encompassing field days. Next year, organisers plan to provide live web feeds of key talks for those who can't attend.

Local farmer and committee member for 25 years, Chris Blunt, says the field days is a major social and business event for the community. "This field days has probably been the biggest attraction in the Orange region over the 60 years it’s been going, and it’s just great for the general community to have something like this to bring people together," Chris says. "There's so much development happening all the time in agriculture and there's so much more to learn, and field days bring it all together in one spot."

From Orange north to Bardonline, Qld, south to Carrick, Tas, and across the Nullarbor to Dowerin, WA, field days are vital to the social and economic life of rural Australia. Not only do they allow farming communities to share experiences and propagate the latest in agricultural technology, they inject millions of dollars into local economies and provide crucial fundraising opportunities for thousands of volunteers, keeping many small-town organisations alive.

With strong commodity prices buoying Australia's agricultural sector, interest in field days is as strong as ever, according to mayor of Orange City Council Reg Kidd. "As Australians, our food and fibre production is our place in the sun," he says, strolling among the machinery exhibitors at the Borenore event. "And there's been this great movement in people wanting to know where their food comes from, so this is our time to shine."
TIME TO SHINE

General manager of the Borenore event, Jayne West, says many of the country’s biggest field days have evolved from humble beginnings and, like most regional events, their popularity has fluctuated. “Field days started off quite small because it was just farmers or machinery groups putting them together, and then I think they went through a big boom after that, and field days popped up all over the eastern seaboard,” Jayne says. “Then they went through a little bit of a dip for a while, and part of that I think was when the internet really established, but people have again discovered they really want to come and look and kick a tyre and, as we’ve seen here, it’s been building up again over the past five years.”

Although reasons for establishing field days vary from community fundraising to machinery marketing, all have a clear focus on promoting agriculture, and provide significant social and economic benefits to their regions. In Lucindale, SA, for example, the South East Field Days started out as a tractor pull in a local paddock and has evolved into the two-day event it is today, attracting crowds of more than 20,000 people. On the other side of the country, Dowerin Field Days coordinator Suzanne Blay says their event was established to help the small Wheatbelt community survive.

“It started in 1964 purely as a way to raise money to build a dam to water the football oval and the tennis courts and try to keep some community amenities going, and it’s just grown from there,” Suzanne says. The annual event now attracts an average of 25,000 visitors to the town of 700 people. “You may only see three or four people in the main street some days and then suddenly you’ve got 25,000 people in one place because of this amazing thing this community has banded together to do, and to see how much everybody pitches in, that is amazing,” she says.

Reflecting agriculture’s spread across the continent, accolades for the biggest, best and oldest field days span the country. The biennial Yorke Peninsula Field Days at Paskeville, SA, are acknowledged as the country’s oldest, starting out as a field trial at nearby Bute in 1895. However, the Australian National Field Days, now in its 67th year, boasts the title of the country’s longest running annual agriculture exhibition.

New South Wales has the biggest, with the annual AgQuip event at Gunnedah attracting more than 100,000 visitors over three days, and the Henty Machinery Field Days notching up about 60,000 visitors each year. Tasmania’s Agfest, held in Carrick, just outside Launceston, also attracts 60,000 visitors over three days, making it one of the top events on the national field days calendar.
more than two dozen field days, Wendy Franklin, says despite the diversity there’s strong camaraderie among organising committees across the country. “What’s unique about all of the field days is that we don’t see each other as competition,” Wendy says. Along with a stronger focus on digital technology, field days have evolved to become more family friendly and community focused, while maintaining their agricultural core.

“Nowadays we really need to capture the women and the children as well, so it’s a family day out,” says Wendy, who also manages the Tocal Field Days, where entertainment includes local school children playing country music and a billy-boiling competition.

As demographics change and consumer trends and technology influence what’s grown, where it’s grown and how it’s grown, Wendy says a key challenge for field days is to evolve and remain relevant. “It’s different for all of us, but here we used to have a lot of big dairy farms and now we have a lot more boutique holdings, which deal in specialty cheeses, and specialty creams and milks, so as your demographic changes you need to change, too,” Wendy says. “Field days need to adapt to work to their market and their audience, keeping it authentic, but being prepared to change to keep it relevant.”

Chief executive officer of Lardner Park, which hosts Farm World, Victoria’s largest field days, Nicola Però, agrees. “Field days used to roll out the same thing every year and that used to work, but it doesn’t work now for a number of reasons,” she says. “I think there is an absolute need to offer multiple reasons for people to make a decision to go.”

Australian National Field Days chairman Dan Toohey says innovation is the key. “We’ve got to look at where the rural community wants to go and we’ve got to either be there or in front of that,” he says.

**MAKING IT HAPPEN**

Before committees are faced with the challenge of keeping their events relevant, they need to make them happen in the first place. Although the event focus varies across the country, from hobby farmers to broadacre cropping, a strong reliance on volunteers is common to all. Ensuring those volunteers are well organised, and not overwhelmed, is crucial to success.

The South East Field Days is run by a committee made up of local Lions Club members, with key tasks such as catering, entertainment and publicity allocated to dedicated stewards. “Everyone has a portfolio and within that portfolio they have their workers and assistants,” says Wendy.

**UPCOMING EVENTS**

- **WIMMERA MACHINERY FIELD DAYS**, March 6–8, Longeranong, Vic
- **SOUTH EAST FIELD DAYS**, March 16–17, Lucindale, SA
- **FARM WORLD**, April 12–15, Lardner, Vic
- **AGFEST**, May 4–5, Carrick, Tas
- **AGFAIR**, May 4–5, Broken Hill, NSW
- **Tocal Field Days**, May 4–6, Paterson, NSW
manager Lyn Crosby says. Although it’s hard work, there’s also plenty of humour, she says. “Last year’s scarecrows, mailboxes and billy-carts steward said he was obviously the best man for it because he was outstanding in his field,” Lyn says, laughing.

Across Bass Strait, youth is the key to success for Tasmania’s Agfest, run by Rural Youth Tasmania and an organising committee with members aged between 15 and 30. ‘I think it brings a certain energy and innovation,” marketing manager Breeanna House says. “We’ve got lots of people who aren’t scared to put their ideas out there,” adds the 25 year old, in her sixth year with the event. As well as providing fresh ideas, Breeanna says having a committee with an average age of 24 means succession planning is always front of mind.

“Because succession planning is important, we’re bringing new people up through the ranks all the time.”

At the Tocal Field Days, 50 kilometres north-west of Newcastle, NSW, students from the local ag college form a vital part of the workforce, marshalling traffic, managing parcel pickups, and providing support across the event. “We’re very lucky to have that workforce available to us,” says manager Wendy Franklin, adding that it not only ensures the event happens but also trains the next generation.

“I see that a lot of these kids are going to go out into their smaller communities and work on farms and own properties in those areas, and we really want them to be involved in their community and community events,” Wendy says. “And it would be great to think we can give them that bit of a grounding so they can make those contributions.”

Other ways to ensure the longevity of events include running them only every two to three years, like the Yorke Peninsula Field Days, now in its 122nd year. Chief executive officer Elaine Bussenschutt OAM says holding their field days every second year allows volunteers a year off and gives the committee a chance to carry out works projects and prepare for the next event without the pressure of a yearly deadline. “To be successful and to continue, you’ve got to be providing a very successful and worthwhile event for all exhibitors,” Elaine says. “We surveyed our exhibitors a few years back and they didn’t want to go every year, and they didn’t want us to have our event over a weekend. So, every two years works very well for us.”

Ensuring permanent sites are put to use throughout the year is another way committees are diversifying and raising additional income to support their main event. In Gippsland, the permanent site of Farm World boasts a 950-person exhibition and conference centre and 6000 square metres of undercover pavilion space. It hosts more than 100 events each year, while the Australian National Field Days at Borenore has individual sheep and cattle days. “And down the road that could be goats, or alpacas, or whatever there is a demand for,” chairman Dan Toohey says. “We have a facility here that allows us to do that right through the year, so we are looking now at how we can further that.”

On the other side of the country, Dowerin Events Management, which hosts the annual Dowerin Field Days two hours north-east of Perth, offers event management services to other large events. Coordinator Suzanne Blay says it’s about utilising not only the event’s permanent infrastructure, but also people skills. “We try to attract product launches for..."
machinery dealerships and things like that," she says. "We can then rent out the venue and we can get local businesses catering, because they’re ways of constantly getting people through our town, and our whole purpose for being here is to benefit our community – that’s the only reason we exist."

KICKING TYRES
For many people, the key attraction of field days is the chance to touch and feel real products, and often talk to the people who designed and built them. Bruce Hutcheon, owner of Coolamon Chaser Bins, says field days provide a travelling shopfront for his business. "We’re a national company and it’s about getting our products out there," says Bruce, who travels to about a dozen field days every year from his base at Coolamon, 40km north of Wagga Wagga, NSW. "Because people want to see your bin, people want to see your product."

For Chris Morrissey, who runs engineering company Morrissey & Co. with her husband Sean, field days offer a unique chance to meet customers face-to-face to discuss their cattle-handling equipment. For a family business like theirs, based at Jandowae, 50km north of Dalby, Qld, that personal connection is vital. "We’ve got websites and Facebook pages, and that’s good, but people like to come and have a bit of a play, which they need to do with this sort of gear to actually have a look at it and see how the gates open, or how the cradle works," Chris says.

Cowra-based sales manager for Carruthers Machinery Co., Ian Trethewey, says the relaxed atmosphere of field days helps dealers connect with customers. "They can walk around at their own pace, with no pressure, rather than sitting at the dealership," Ian says, leaning on a new Case IH Magnum tractor at the Australian National Field Days. It also gives people the chance to ask questions they may not feel comfortable asking elsewhere. "A fella who was in beforehand had a problem with his guidance equipment and I was able to fix him up in 10 seconds and his wife videoed it on her phone so he can play it back," Ian says. "He’s now got my card and he’s got me as a reference point."

For businesses with both agricultural and non-agricultural operations, it’s a win-win. Orange-based commercial aviation company Helicruz, which provides aerial filming services, fire-fighting and cherry fanning, is a case in point. "It’s a big promotional thing for us," says owner and pilot Craig Murphy, stepping from the cockpit after a scenic flight at the Australian National Field Days. "Not only do we get to take people for scenic flights to show them what Orange has to offer, even if people don’t fly, if they just come up for a chat, that can progress to work in the future."

As well as connecting with potential customers, for many smaller vendors, such as John Den, who started...
OUTBACK STORY

Aussie Fire Buckets in Forbes 18 months ago, field days are a chance to socialise. “I like meeting the people, getting out there and being among it,” says John, who doesn’t have a website and sells most of his products through retail nurseries and garden centres. “You can sit in your vehicle and go from nursery to nursery and garden centre to whatever, and you don’t ever meet the customer, but the customer likes to meet the person who designs it, makes it and delivers it,” John says.

Kate Jones, who lives at Eurugabah station between Ivanhoe and Hay, NSW, and runs Rustic Soul Handmade Jewellery with her cousin Rachael Whitelegg, relishes the chance to mix with other small-business owners. “Neither of us get out that much, so it’s good to come to field days to chat to different people and hear their stories,” Kate says. “And it’s great to catch up with other stallholders, too. I love hearing all their stories and how they got started and where they’re from. It’s a lot of fun.”

ADAPTING TO THE MARKET

Although field days remain crucial to the sales model for many regional businesses and manufacturers, Tractor and Machinery Association of Australia executive director, Gary Northover, says a key challenge is to remain relevant and cost-effective for larger tractor and machinery dealers. “Most of the tractor manufacturers have pretty well developed sales teams now that are out there talking to customers throughout the year, so the days of relying on field days to clinch a sale, or to develop a sale, are probably past, or much less relevant,” says Gary, adding that the internet has also dramatically changed how farmers research their next big purchase. “They’re doing a lot of their research on the internet before they even talk to a machinery sales rep, so that’s also changed the emphasis on field days. So, the message we’d say is it’s probably appropriate to start thinking about the role of field days from a tractor and machinery point of view, how to actually make them work, because the traditional methods are proving challenging.”

Group manager for Fairfax Rural Events, Kate Nugent, understands those concerns and says field days committees across the country are looking at ways to ensure exhibitors and consumers both get something they can’t get elsewhere. “We’ve got to look at ways we can work with our exhibitors, because our interest is in growing their sales, and to continue to work to that bottom line of the Australian ag industry,” says Kate, who oversees the management of Australia’s largest field days, AgQuip, and Queensland’s largest, Toowoomba’s FarmFest. “And we’ve got a responsibility to those agricultural companies and manufacturers of associated products to listen and learn and act to make sure we set up a sales environment.”

Despite the challenges, Kate is confident that by encouraging exhibitors to be innovative and providing them with the space and means to offer demonstrations, field days can adapt to remain a key part of the marketing model for the bigger end of town. “There’s no doubt field days have a very important role and will continue to, and we’re proving that time and time again with our events,” says Kate, explaining that last year’s AgQuip generated more than $20 million in sales over three days, with 3000 companies represented.
while FarmFest continues to expand due to growing exhibitor interest. It’s a similar story down south, where research shows the 2015 spend at Tasmania’s Agfest was estimated at $26 million.

TESTING THE WATERS

As well as providing a travelling marketplace for tried and tested products, field days are a great testing ground for the latest technological developments. Last year, both New Holland and Case IH unveiled new concept autonomous tractors at Australian field days. ‘A lot of people had probably heard about the new technology, both online and through the grapevine, so it was a chance to really see it in the flesh and understand its capabilities, and to see that it probably is something that is coming in the not-too-distant future,’ says New Holland national marketing manager Tara Stewart, adding there was a strong positive response to the company’s new NH Drive concept autonomous tractor, which toured AgQuip, Henty, Yorke Peninsula and Elmore field days. ‘And because you’re seeing it in the flesh you get a better understanding of how it would work in application, as opposed to something you’ve seen online, which may or may not become a reality.’

Field days are also important for emerging brands. Business development manager for Sydney-based software company AgriWebb, Jamie Lawrence, says they offer a vital point of contact for their digital business, which started four years ago. ‘The big drawcard of field days for us is to get in front of people and build our brand awareness,’ Jamie says. At last year’s Australian National Field Days, AgriWebb provided one-on-one appointments for customers to discuss their farm management app. For Rhonda and Andrew Watt, sheep graziers at Cumnock, 60km north-west of Orange, that personal interaction helps get more out of a product they’re already using. ‘To actually sit down and go through it on the screen, face-to-face, it’s so much easier, and it’s 10 times as quick because I’m a very visual sort of person,’ Rhonda says. ‘We’ve definitely learned more than we came here to ask.’

It goes both ways. As well as providing existing customers with advice, field days offer a chance for companies to gather feedback customers may not
otherwise provide. For a developing product like AgriWebb, that’s crucial. “Field days offer us a chance to not only catch up with existing clients, but to see how they’re liking the product, and any improvements they’d like to have made,” Jamie says. Sales manager for Coolamon Chaser Bins, Peter Munro, agrees. “I’ll write down certain things that might be repeated to me two or three times a year and bring them up when we have meetings,” Peter says. “It’s a great way of doing your R&D.”

KNOWLEDGE ACCELERATOR

As well as traditional livestock-classing competitions, innovation awards and machinery demonstrations, field days across the country are constantly looking for new ways to spread knowledge. In a big white tent in the middle of the Westech Field Days at Barcaldine, Qld, Australian olive-oil pioneer Rob McGavin is talking about his journey from station boy on nearby property Jubilee Park to CEO and executive chairman of Boundary Bend Limited, one of the country’s most successful and innovative agribusinesses. A crowd of local farmers and aspiring businesspeople listen intently before their chance to sit down and share their ideas as part of a free Entrepreneur Matching Program.

Organised by the Remote Area Planning and Development Board (RAPAD), an organisation formed by seven central western shires to promote regional development, the inaugural Westech Innovation Space and Technology Precinct is a great example of how field days help spread ideas. All of the speakers, including an aeronautical engineer, software developers and telecommunications entrepreneurs, grew up in the bush or are passionate about regional Australia.

“The basis for the Westech Field Days when it started was around innovation and invention, and back then you had to physically bring something here, so we’re really just continuing that tradition, but in this digital age,” says special project officer for RAPAD, Morgan Gronold. “The aim was to bring together entrepreneurs who started here, and from away, to help local people take their ideas from outback to out front. It was about inspiration and it was about practical help, and it was about connections, giving someone a connection to help them get their idea to the next level.” By leveraging off Westech’s reputation, Morgan says concepts like the innovation space reach more people. “The great thing with Westech is that it pulls people not just from our seven shires, but from beyond; this is where everyone comes to,” he says. “We knew if we held the event here it would be successful and we’d get good crowds.”

As well as spreading new ideas, Simon Wiggins says field days provide an important opportunity to showcase the latest jobs available in the bush. As director of

Max English from Horsham, Vic, takes a free hearing test with Sue Ward in the Wimmera Hearing Society’s screening van, which visits field days across Victoria and South Australia.
Outback Story

Longreach engineering company PBE Services, he visits field days across central western Queensland to showcase how his company works with Desert Channels Queensland, using drones to eradicate prickly acacia. "We use drones to find the weeds, we use drones to kill the weeds, and we use drones to determine the success of the program," says Simon, standing beside a $150,000 Yamaha RMAX drone.

By showing technology such as the RMAX, Simon says rural students can see they don’t need to travel away for interesting and diverse careers. "The kids are taking to the technology so quickly that they’re starting to see jobs in the bush that they actually want to stick to," Simon says. "These bright kids used to leave, and they’d go to places where they thought there were better jobs and we lost them from the west and we lost them from agriculture, but these are the kinds of things that are keeping them coming back." And for a regional business such as PBE Services, attracting new talent is crucial. "That’s important to us because we need to keep talent in the west; from our perspective that’s how you keep the jobs coming in," Simon says. "Because when you match talented people with some of the new programs coming out that drones can supply information to, you get some extraordinary results."

Young farmer Rachel Nicoll says field days are great motivators. "You hear so many fascinating stories, and being able to celebrate the success of each and every person who is here today is great," says the 30 year old, fresh from giving a talk in the NSW Farmers’ marquee at the Australian National Field Days. Rachel works on her family’s property near Hampton, NSW, farming free-range eggs and poultry, berries, chestnuts and rhubarb. "Some days you can be out in the paddock and you’ve got mud up to here, or the truck’s bogged and you think, ‘Gosh this is hard,’ and then you come to an event like this and can stand upon the shoulders of giants."

Healthy Communities

At the heart of all field days is community. From growing regional centres such as Orange, to small towns facing population decline such as Dowerin, field days offer a unique opportunity for people to come together and support not only their towns, but each other. In a marquee at Westech, well-dressed women...
are laughing and having a few drinks while being served lunch prepared by a top Brisbane chef. For pastoralist Jayde Chandler, the inaugural ladies’ lunch is a chance to catch up with old friends and talk about life on the land. “It’s just so important for women, young and old, to get together and share the stress, and offload that stress, and we’ve got to stick together and enjoy ourselves when we can,” says Jayde, who runs the family property Gregory Park, 40km south of Barcaldine, with her husband Ben. “This is another Westech that has come around and there has been no rain since the last one, and I just think it’s so important for people’s mental health more than anything to get out and enjoy themselves.”

Local property valuer Ali Cooper agrees. Having grown up in Brisbane before moving to her fiancé’s family property Dunraven, 20km south west of Barcaldine, Ali says events like the Westech lunch are vital for building healthy communities. “As someone who’s relatively new to the area, it’s certainly good to meet people, because I think it’s hard for the women in this area to connect, especially women on isolated properties,” Ali says. “These events are crucial, and you can see by the turnout and the fact it sold out so quickly, the importance of it.”

Many events also provide a more direct health benefit. At the South East Field Days in Lucindale, SA, the Lions Club provides a number of free health services. “We have a focus on rural health and sponsor the Wimmera Hearing Society van every year, which does free hearing tests, and the Lions Club now has its own mobile skin cancer-screening van, and people can come and get their moles checked for free,” manager Lyn Crosby says. “Last year was the first year we’ve done it and they screened nearly 400 people and there were 99 serious cases that had to be referred.”

As farms continue to grow in size and technology reduces labour requirements, Orange farmer Chris Blunt says the importance of field days for the health of rural communities is greater than ever. “With the fact that most people are working the land on their own, you might go for weeks without seeing anyone other than your family,” Chris says. “It’s healthy to come out … it gets you out of your shell, and chatting to other people is always healthy for the mind.”

FLOW-ON BENEFITS
As well as bringing regions together, field days inject millions of dollars into local economies. Four hundred kilometres north of Orange, the country’s biggest field days, AgQuip, not only provides a huge stimulus to the local Gunnedah economy, but last year contributed an estimated $12 million to the business sector of Tamworth, 80km away. “And there’s Narrabri, Coonabarabran, Armidale – they all benefit,” says Kate Nugent, group manager for Fairfax Rural Events, organisers of AgQuip.

Field days also offer many smaller towns their major fundraising opportunity for the year. Like most events, the South East Field Days pays community organisations to perform myriad jobs. Lyn Crosby says that without the annual field days many of the small town’s community organisations would struggle to exist. “The Lions Club to date has donated $2.1 million to charity,” Lyn says. “The field days is the club’s major fundraiser and it all gets ploughed back into the community and local organisations, which is immensely important.”

In Dowerin, the field days almost singlehandedly
keeps the town alive. “Over the past 10 years, alone, we’ve injected $1.3 million back into our community via grants, sponsorships and community donations,” Suzanne Blay says. “In 2016, just from purchases and hiring goods and equipment for the event, we put $175,000 back into the local and surrounding towns, and I don’t think there’s a main building in town we haven’t injected money into, and that’s just our town. Then there are all the surrounding towns, which have benefitted as well.”

Dowerin’s 700 residents are the backbone of the event, Suzanne says. “We have over 300 volunteers, which is a 43 percent volunteer rate from the town alone, so it has a huge importance in continuing to bring people together,” she says. “Without the field days, we’d have a lot fewer services and a lot fewer people, so it’s completely intrinsic to our community culture.”

A JOB WELL DONE
Back at Borenore, another field days is over and Jayne West is breathing a sigh of relief. “It’s a 12-month planning process, so on the final day, when exhibitors are packing up, having someone come in and say, ‘Jayne, this was an absolutely amazing event and we will book again for next year,’ that’s so rewarding,” says Jayne, standing outside the administration building that has been the centre of her world for the past three days.

For Suzanne, who grew up in Dublin, Ireland, and moved to Dowerin only two years ago, being involved with Western Australia’s largest field days has shown her firsthand the unique camaraderie rural Australia is famous for. “When the event is happening, people will randomly bring us flowers or food in the office and it’s just so nice to have that community feeling,” Suzanne says. “I really love that aspect of my job and it just makes all the pressure and all the stress worthwhile.”

Up at Tocal, NSW, Wendy Franklin says a growing public interest in food, and where it comes from, means field days have a strong future. “People are starting to realise food isn’t just about the farmer, food is for all of us and we all need to know where it comes from and how it grows,” Wendy says, adding that seeing younger generations involved is one of the most rewarding aspects of organising the field days. “Because it’s never too early to expose kids to agriculture; there’s no-one that it doesn’t affect, it’s everything.”

Kate Nugent says the continued success of events such as her organisation’s AgQuip, FarmFest and ProAg in Macksville, NSW, highlight the importance and value of field days. “Economically, culturally and socially, there are the meeting places for rural Australia,” Kate says. “And we are all very passionate about the part we play.”

Brothers Jamie and Jock Hayman from Blackall watch a cattle classing workshop at the Westech Field Days in Barcaldine, Qld.