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*Evaluation Survey*  
*Young Irrigators Group*

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# *Introduction*

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The Young Irrigators Group (YIG) was formed in the 2009/10 financial year. The initial membership was made up of 31 young irrigators including spouses. The Riverland West Local Action Planning Association Inc. (RWLAP) was given a grant for establishing the YIG. After consulting the YIG members at its formation, a mixture of the following activities were undertaken: workshops, financial planning, group meetings with guest speakers, tours to other regions and states, and farm demonstrations and trial sites.

The trial sites/farm demonstrations were used to demonstrate how an understanding of soils and the use of soil moisture monitoring equipment could be used to schedule irrigation, avoid excessive drainage and manage salinity in the root zone while maintaining or improving crop production.

RWLAP in partnership with the South Australian Murray Darling Basin Natural Resources Management Board (SAMDBNRM) and the Department for Water (DfW) facilitated the delivery of most of the program, either directly or by co-opting a third party. The program was delivered outside of the major on-farm activity period of December through March during which irrigation, crop management, and harvesting took place.

As the grant to run the YIG will cease by June 2011, the RWLAP decided to evaluate the effectiveness of YIG, find out what was the preferred learning activity and whether the YIG members wished for it to continue. This evaluation will inform the decision whether to apply for further project funding by RWLAP. Tony Meissner of Laroona Environmetrics was contracted in late July 2011 to undertake the evaluation by surveying the opinions of the YIG members.

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## *Survey Planning and Methodology*

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In late July 2011, Tony Meissner met with Renee Thompson, Policy Officer with Department for Water (DfW) and Karen Bishop, RWLAP Project Officer, to discuss the conduct of the evaluation and its objectives. The objectives of the evaluation of YIG were:

- What were the reasons for attending YIG activities and which activities were of most benefit;
- Whether members had gained knowledge and a better understanding of irrigation practices through YIG activities;
- Whether members changed their on-farm management practices as a result; and

- To determine the direction the YIG should take in the future.

It was decided that the evaluation was to be conducted via telephone interview and that eleven questions were to be asked (see Appendix 1). At the time of the interview, the interviewee was asked his/her age to gain an age profile of the membership. If possible, all members were to be interviewed. An email explaining the survey and a copy of the questions was sent to the group members a week before the start of the survey. This was followed up by a SMS to members to check their emails. The survey began on Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> August 2011 and the last interview took place on Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> August. On Monday 29 August, preliminary results were presented to the RWLAP Committee.

The answers to the questions given by the person interviewed were summarised and stored in a database. The database allowed for ease of retrieval and sorting of answers according to various criteria. This helped in gaining an overall impression of the views of YIG members.

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## *Survey Results*

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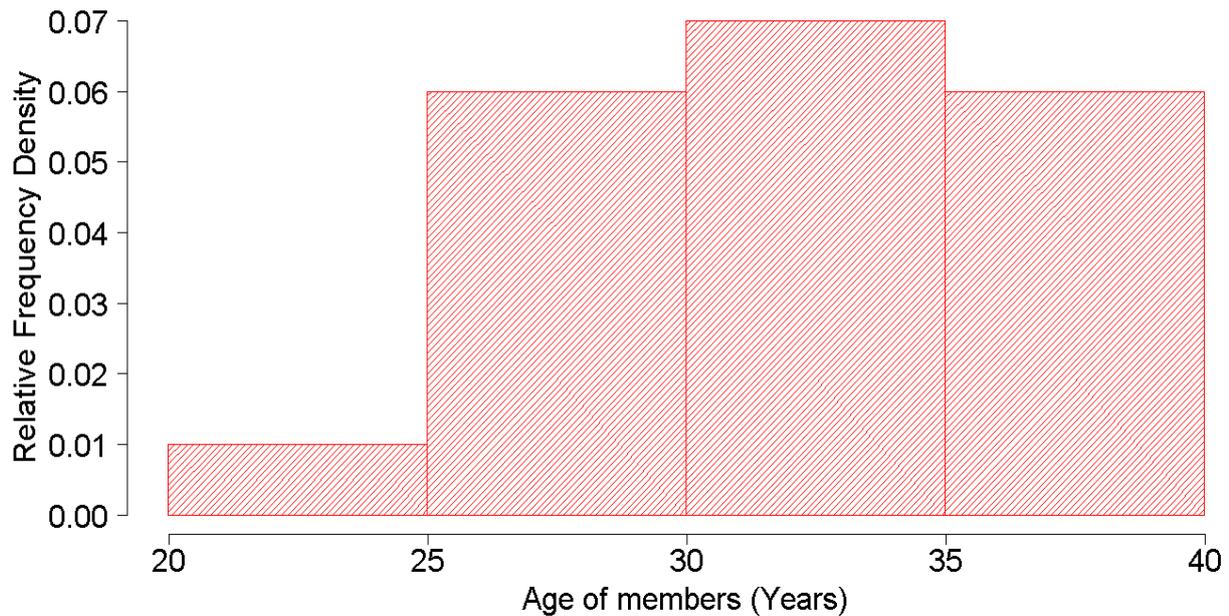
The membership list provided by the RWLAP had 26 names; all but one was contacted by telephone. The member not contacted had only just joined the group. Of the twenty five members contacted, 19 were interviewed. Of the remaining six that were not interviewed there was no one single reason that prevailed and therefore the reasons are not listed.

The age profile of the membership ranged from the early twenties to the late thirties. A histogram of the age profile is presented in **Figure 1**. Over 50 percent of the membership is over thirty years old and about one third over thirty five years old.

The summary of the responses given by those interviewed are documented below for each of the questions.

- **Question 1**

Of the nineteen members who were interviewed in the survey, 9 attended all or most activities, 7 attended from about four to eight activities, and three members attended less than 4 activities. Hence, most members attended sufficient meetings to indicate their overall interest in the activities undertaken by the group and for an overall assessment of views expressed by interviewees.



**Figure 1 Distribution of ages of interviewed YIG members**

## • Question 2

Question 2 asked why members attended YIG activities and meetings. Of those who attended **few** meetings they said they had other priorities or did not have the time to spare to attend. Typical comments for those who attended **some** of the meetings were:

- ◆ *Learn what is happening in industry;*
- ◆ *Knowledge. Networking. Interesting topics; and*
- ◆ *Get away from block. Share information.*

Learning, networking and gaining knowledge were typical comments of those who attended **most** YIG activities. Expanding their knowledge base was also a significant response given and some included the social aspects of the group in the answers they gave.

## • Question 3

Question 3 was a two-part question; the first part asked whether their attitudes to River Murray issues had changed as a result of the activities of the Young Irrigators Group. **Table 1** shows that half the irrigator group had not changed their views on River Murray issues and the other half said that it had. This was unaffected by how many activities they attended.

Common comments that were made were:

- ◆ *More understanding of River Murray but hasn't changed ideas;*
- ◆ *Broaden horizons but views little changed;*

- ◆ *More aware of the politics of the issues;*
- ◆ *Reinforced views;*
- ◆ *More aware of upstream and downstream issues;*
- ◆ *Upstream - how water is allocated. how floods are managed; and*
- ◆ *Downstream - River doesn't end at own back yard.*

**Table 1 The number of respondents that answered “Yes” or “No” to whether YIG membership changed their views on River Murray Issues (Question 3(a)).**

Answer	Attendance			Total
	Few	Some	Most	
No	2	4	3	9
Yes	1	3	6	10

A similar proportion of young irrigators answered either “Yes” or “No” to whether YIG activities influenced their on-farm activities (Table 2) but with an indication that those who attended most activities/meetings were more likely to change their on-farm management or practices.

**Table 2: Number of members of YIG answering either “Yes” or “No” to Question3 (b) about changes in “on-farm” practices**

Answer	Attendance			Total
	Few	Some	Most	
No	2	5	1	8
Yes	0	2	8	10

The following comments were typical of the answers given in response to part (b) of Question 3: -

- ◆ *Using soil moisture monitoring lead to water savings;*
- ◆ *Picked up ideas from listening to other people and seeing trials and demonstrations;*
- ◆ *Either confirmed or changed activities where this was not working previously;*
- ◆ *Little change apart from becoming more educated; and*
- ◆ *On farm have not had much impact as yet but there is potential.*

## • Question 4

The majority of responses given were in support of the value of tours to outside the region as a valuable learning experience. Both the Hume/Dartmouth dams and the Lower Lakes tours made a strong impression on those that went. This was also echoed in answers given to Question 3(a) on the River Murray. A variety of reasons were given for the value of tours including:

- ◆ *Appreciated a different point-of-view even if not agreeing with all views;*
- ◆ *Better understanding of what others are doing and their issues;*
- ◆ *Broadens knowledge base; and*
- ◆ *Felt that it had an environmental focus rather than an industry based focus.*

Several comments were made, especially in answers given to later questions, that tours are a big time commitment and therefore needed to be relevant and educational.

## • Question 5

This question explored the value of guest speakers in learning. Almost all young irrigators said that guest speakers were of value but that it depended on the quality of the speaker, whether the topic presented new ideas or knowledge and appealed to the interest of the listener; either on an industry specific basis or the irrigator looking for more information on a particular farm practice e.g. fertigation.

Some topics that were of particular interest were:

- ◆ *Financial information e.g. Rabobank although there was a negative comment given;*
- ◆ *Fruit doctors on pest, diseases and nutrition; and*
- ◆ *Soil moisture monitoring.*

## • Question 6

The most common answer given to this question was “*seeing is believing*”. All but four irrigators were positive about the value of farm demonstrations and trials. The practical nature of this activity, the ability to be able to see how things operated “*on the block*”, and the pros and cons of a particular practice or equipment were some common answers given in response to this question. Having seen what was being trialled or demonstrated prompted several members to try it on their farms.

## • Question 7

Most members of YIG felt that the current structure of the program satisfied their needs. However, there were a few suggestions made that YIG should consider in future activities. These were:

- ◆ *Mentoring of young irrigators by older irrigators i.e. irrigators over 40 years old;*
- ◆ *Inviting Ben Haslett as guest a speaker;*

- ◆ *Local trips to farms more beneficial. For instance, half day trips in the morning finishing with lunch and guest speaker; and*
- ◆ *Workshop/Conference being more interactive rather than extensive tours.*

It was felt that the current program gave a balance between practical experience, exposure to new ideas and broadening the knowledge through tours outside the region. This view was reinforced by answers given to the next question.

## • Question 8

This question asked participants in the survey to date what the most valuable learning experience was. Most of them answered that “*balance was important*” and each of the elements (tours, guest speakers, farm trials/demonstrations and workshops) provided enough variety for members to keep their interest in attending. However, some individually gave their preference for one of the activities.

## • Question 9

Through the YIG, the trialling of monitoring equipment was offered. This question was to find out whether this trialling of equipment was of benefit to members who took up the offer. However, it was realised after several interviews that the answers to the question did not only relate to installation and trialling of equipment through the YIG initiative but also to equipment the irrigators themselves had installed and used. Subsequently, this question was made more general, while ascertaining whether the equipment was sponsored by YIG or otherwise.

Sixteen irrigators had variety of equipment installed or waiting to be installed; 5 had been installed through the YIG project and 8 had their own equipment. Two irrigators were waiting for their equipment to be installed through the YIG project. The equipment ranged from soil moisture monitoring equipment, solute samplers and red light/green light. Thirteen irrigators said that they used the equipment to manage their operations or make management decisions on the farm, either daily or less frequently. These decisions related to water, fertiliser, and salinity management.

## • Question 10

This question explored the role of government agencies e.g. PIRSA/SARDI, DfW and DENR, the SAMDBNRM Board and the RWLAP in providing support for YIG. The LAP group was recognised for their role in organising the activities of the YIG. Without this support YIG would have likely struggled to remain active. Overall, there were positive comments about the role of these organisations in providing support, each organisation having a particular role. The support of the SAMDBNRM Irrigation Support Officers was appreciated. Government agencies and the NRM Board were acknowledged for their funding support. There were a number of comments that the NRM Board was seen to be too environmentally focussed, not necessarily a bad thing of itself, but the Board needed to appreciate the commercial realities with which irrigators are faced.

## Question 11

Should YIG continue was the question asked? Unanimous support was given by members interviewed for continuing YIG. Typical answers were:

- ◆ *Good for young irrigators to get together;*
- ◆ *Young irrigators' network;*
- ◆ *Chance to meet and exchange ideas;*
- ◆ *Good to keep going as long as there is relevance;*
- ◆ *helps to develop a positive attitude to the future; and*
- ◆ *New ideas/knowledge gained.*

There were no suggestions to whether the YIG should take a new direction, or how it could keep going if funding was not available. These aspects were not explicitly asked in the question and so views on how the group is to function in the future was not voluntarily or spontaneously given.

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## Discussion

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There were significant numbers of members responding that indicated the general feeling of the membership to how effective YIG has been. There is a clear indication that the group should continue in its activities in the future. Whether it continues, if funding is not available, cannot be determined from this survey. It is likely that without the funding and administrative support of RWLAP, the group would have not been as successful as it has.

There are a variety of views as to what was valuable in the learning experiences undertaken by the group. Certainly, on-farm demonstrations and trials were most valuable to a large number of members, but they also recognised that there needs to be a balance or variety of activities so that interest is maintained and appeals to the broader membership.

The age profile of the group leans to the over thirties. This needs to be recognised and strategies developed to attract younger members to the group. The suggestion of mentoring is an idea that is worth considering with the possibility of the over thirty five year old members acting as mentors to the youngest members as a first step.

Whilst the young irrigators thought the various activities were worthwhile, several expressed the view that the social aspects were a consideration they made in continuing to attend. Networking was seen as a very strong driver for attending YIG activities. Recognising both the social and the networking aspects are strong drivers for attending should be considered when designing future YIG programs.

Because the number of members in the survey was only 26, it was not feasible to test the questions on a small number of members to find out whether the questions were giving the expected range of responses. Whilst this may have had some effect on the answers given, particularly Question 9, the overall impression of the views of the members were clear enough as to their views of the value of YIG and its activities and whether to continue the group.

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## *Conclusions*

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The evaluation of the results of the survey of members of the Young Irrigators Group gave a clear indication that tours, guest speakers, workshops and farm demonstrations and trials were valuable. These activities provided new learning, knowledge and helped broaden understanding of River Murray issues, irrigation practices and the management of soils, water and salinity. This learning experience was sufficient for members wanting to continue the activities of the group.

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## *Acknowledgements*

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I wish to acknowledge the willing cooperation of the YIG members in participating in the telephone survey, even those who chose not to be interviewed. I would also like to thank Karen Bishop and Renee Thompson for their helpful suggestions and providing documentation. Lastly, I wish to thank the RWLAP committee for their open discussion on the preliminary results.

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# Appendix 1

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## **Riverland West Young Irrigators**

### **Evaluation Survey**

1. How many activities, e.g. tours, field trips etc. have you attended?
  - All/most
  - Some
  - A few/none
  
2. Why do you/don't you attend Group activities?
  
3. Has attending YIG activities changed your views on River Murray issues
  - and your on-farm activities?
  
4. Have the tours been valuable learning experiences?
  - why?
  
5. Are guest speakers of value for learning and why?
  
6. Are farm trials and demonstrations a worthwhile learning tool. Give reasons?
  
7. Are there other activities or ways of doing activities that you think should be done?

8. Of the learning opportunities (given in questions 4, 5, 6 or 7) do you rate as the most important?

9. Have you had equipment installed (e.g. soil moisture probes, red light-green light etc.) on your property?

- Yes/No

If yes,

What equipment has been installed?

How useful was this equipment in your day to day operations on your block?

10. To date the Group has been supported by Government, NRM Board, or Riverland West Lap Officers. Do you think their support has been a positive or negative for the Group?

11. Is there value in continuing the YIG? Give reasons?