

Student Connect Program 2020 –

Creating connections between farmers and agriculture students through sustainable farming innovative demonstrations, lectures and mentoring.

SCF is proud to support the youth and the future of our industry by providing better links between farmers and agricultural students. The program aimed to better equip students by connecting them to farmers and industry professionals, helping to expose them to the wide range of industry employment the Ag sector provides. This was achieved through sustainable farming innovation demonstrations, lectures and mentoring throughout the year.

Last year was the final year for the Student connect program. SCF partnered with the WA College of Agriculture Denmark, Mount Barker Community College and Great Southern Grammar for the Student Connect Program 2020, made possible with support from the Federal Government's National Landcare Program Smart Farms Small Grants.

The start of the year was disrupted due to lockdowns and restrictions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This affected the program by restricting people (farmers and scientists) from entering school grounds. Launch of the program was delayed as welcome pack material was converted from a hard copy into online resources available to students through the SCF website-student portal. In this portal an online introduction to the program was available for the students to watch during class. Also included was informational material, a welcome letter, SCF prospectus, SCF 2019 trials review booklet, newsletter, a pre-program survey and a program outline tailored to each school.

Fortunately, Stratus Imaging were able to come down from Perth early in the year (pre-covid) to present a drone demonstration for the students. Exposing students to the latest technology of UAV's and their practical applications. This included collecting data which can assist in critical crop management decisions, fertiliser application and spraying. At the most disruptive time of the year SCF uploaded a virtual field tour looking at the impact of stubble management on small conical snail mortality to the student portal allowing students the opportunity to virtually attend a field site. By term four a bit of normality had returned and Mount Barker students had an excursion to the smart farm site at West Kendenup. Here students viewed some of the latest technology including automated weather stations and soil moisture probes. Importantly, they were informed as to how data can improve decision making, efficiency, sustainability and profitability. A demonstration site of different mixed pastures at the Slade smart farm were observed and the SCF staff demonstrated how

a drone can be used to collect paddock NDVI imagery. This was also demonstrated to WA College of Ag Denmark students later who attended the Livestock' 20 event. These events allow students to network with specialists in the industry resulting in increased knowledge on agricultural careers and understanding of production and management issues.



Over the course of the school year, where possible, SCF organised informative lectures to compliment the current curriculum and enhance industry and NRM themes. Some of the lectures, included presentations from industry representatives on careers in agriculture and technology use. Students were introduced to technology that enable farmers to make better informed farm decisions based on real time hyper local data collected through smart farm equipment. Kim Brooksbank from DPIRD also talked to Denmark students about climate change and how a drying climate is going to require current farming practices to change and how this will create opportunities for new industries and alternate energy sources to emerge.

Students participating in the program were encouraged to apply for a Scholarship valued at \$1000 to be held by the school to contribute towards their Agricultural studies. One scholarship was offered to each school. With the last few years having late breaks and minimal runoff to refill dams the pertinent question was asked – "What practices or practice changes would you





encourage local farmers to adopt to sustainably manage on-farm water supplies". Students in year 11 were asked to complete a 500-1000-word essay answering this question. All students who submitted an essay should be commended on their efforts; a high calibre of essays was received making the selection process considerably hard. Congratulations to the winning applicants Toby Manson (GSG), Jas Cugley (Denmark) and Dermot McCague (Mt Barker), who were awarded the scholarship during their graduation ceremonies.

The final activity for the school year was the successful career information sessions. A joint event for Mt Barker and GSG students was held at Mount Barker Community College and another session was held at WA College of Ag Denmark. During these presentations students learnt of new career opportunities in the Agriculture industry that they previously may not have considered. These sessions included a wide range of Ag professionals including vets, farmers, corporate farmers, merchandise sales reps, fertiliser reps, DPIRD researchers, agronomists and farm finance advisors. This wide range of individuals broadened the student's understanding of the employment opportunities available in the Agricultural industry and showcased a range of backgrounds taking both secondary and tertiary education pathways. SCF received plenty of positive feedback from students, staff members and presenters. One of our SCF member's reported that they spoke later with a student from the WA College of Agriculture, Denmark who commented on how much they enjoyed the careers session and got a lot out of it (March 2021).

A major outcome for this project has been the lasting networks and relationships being formed that will continue as these student's head to university and out into the workforce. We look forward to continuing partnering with the schools in some way and continuing to hold Ag specific career info sessions annually. I would like to thank all our members, and industry professionals that volunteered to lecture and mentor students throughout the year. Without you this program would not be possible.



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