

Codesigning a sustainability standard for the future: from producers to market

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Abstract. Consumers worldwide are placing increasing importance on the sustainability of the products and services they consume. In response to customer demands, HW Greenham and Sons (Greenham) have invested three years into developing a sustainability standard (the Greenham Beef Sustainability Standard (GBSS)) for their grassfed supply chain. This was achieved by working closely with producers to codesign the GBSS using the Australian Beef Sustainability Framework as a foundation. The initial phase of codesign was conducted over a three-month period, using a series of short online facilitated meetings. Consultation with customers and technical experts was then followed by further codesign. The GBSS was piloted with 21 producers representing a variety of businesses and production systems. The GBSS moves beyond a “tick-a-box” compliance approach for sustainability, to proactively drive uptake of best practice amongst the supply chain, providing education and support to producers.

Keywords: sustainability accreditation, codesign, livestock, markets, environmental credential.

Introduction

Consumers worldwide are placing increasing importance on the sustainability of the products and services they consume. There has been a spotlight on animal production, particularly in the context of greenhouse gas emissions and the carbon footprint of red meat. More recently nature positive (or biodiversity-friendly) and regenerative agriculture are becoming a focus. HW Greenham and Sons (Greenham) had addressed customer interest regarding animal welfare practices by integrating Certified Humane®, a US-based animal welfare accreditation program, to their NEVER EVER Beef Program in 2017. In 2023 they launched a bolt-on, the Greenham Beef Sustainability Standard (GBSS), to meet customer demand around other areas of sustainability. The standard was built on the four themes covered by the Australian Beef Sustainability Framework (ABSF): animal welfare, economic resilience, environmental stewardship, and people and the community. While this project was instigated by Greenham to respond to customer demands, it has broader implications for the Australian livestock industry. The project is the first where the ABSF has been applied at a value chain level, providing important lessons regarding the practical application of the framework. It is critical for supply chains to be proactive in meeting customer demand and drive the agenda around sustainability. This will ensure that sustainability standards are practical and meaningful on-farm, and position supply chains to take advantage of market premiums for early adopters and maintain market share in the long-term.

The GBSS took over three years to develop. A codesign approach with beef producers was utilised, initially involving a project reference group, and then a larger group of producers who volunteered to pilot the standard on farm. Thorough consultation with customers and technical experts occurred iteratively during the project. The third-party audited GBSS is endorsed by Certified Humane®, and environmental and agricultural specialists, Integrity Ag & Environment. As well as developing robust, practical sustainability indicators and measures, the project also identified where support and training was likely to be required to assist producers in engaging with the GBSS. The importance of education and taking Greenham suppliers on a journey was a key principle identified early in the codesign process.

Methods

Codesign with the producer working group

Members of the producer working group were selected in consultation with Greenham’s Tasmanian livestock buyers. Email invitations, accompanied by terms of reference, were extended to 21 beef producers from Tasmania and Flinders and King Islands. Ten beef producers committed to participating, nine from various locations in Tasmania and one from Flinders Island. The group represented a diversity of business types, scales, and geographies. The intention was to conduct the codesign sessions via 2-3 face-to-face workshops, but this was impacted by COVID-19 restrictions, and as such was re-worked for online delivery. The codesign process used the following steps:

1. Pre-reading was provided followed by an introductory facilitated online meeting. The meeting purpose was to endorse the Terms of Reference and ensure the working group members were committed to the project and proposed approach and introduced the ABSF.

2. A summary of the ABSF was prepared and potential relevance of the ABSF indicators at a farm scale highlighted.
3. One-on-one interviews were held with the producers to obtain feedback into draft on-farm sustainability frameworks for animal welfare, people, economic resilience, and environmental stewardship (the framework and interview questions were provided as pre-reading, to enable them to prepare).
4. The interview findings were summarised, and the sustainability framework design refined (including shortlisting key performance indicators and potential measures). This material was then shared with the producer working group.
5. A series of online meetings were conducted to obtain input from the producer working group. There were separate meetings held for economic/animal welfare and people and community, and the environmental theme was covered at two separate meetings. A wrap up meeting was then held to finalise the draft GBSS. All meetings were scheduled following a DoodlePoll of the group, which indicated one hour at lunch time suited group members best. Pre-reading was circulated ahead of all meetings and producers were expected to come prepared to participate in discussion with minimal “theory” delivered. The meetings used a mixture of polls and breakout groups to both capture feedback quickly and enable in-depth discussion by the group members. At the conclusion of each meeting a quick round-the-room was used to capture how group members were feeling and identify any issues. Where required follow up phone calls and emails were used between meetings to communicate in more depth with working group members (or where members were unable to attend a meeting).

The whole process as outlined above was delivered between April and June 2020, and on average producers committed a minimum of 12 hours.

6. The producer working group subsequently met four times between February and April 2021 to further refine the GBSS indicators and measures, following external input, customer consultation and on-going technical refinement.

External consultation

As the draft GBSS began to take shape (step 6 above) consultation was conducted with key Greenham customers and independent technical experts (Integrity Ag and Environment). This feedback was integrated into the draft Standard in consultation with the producer reference group to ensure scientific rigour and market relevance.

Piloting the GBSS

A SurveyMonkey link was used to capture expressions of interest from Greenham’s beef suppliers to participate in the pilot. The registration link was circulated to selected Greenham suppliers via email. An online information session was held in March 2022 for producers interested in participating in the pilot. Twenty-one beef producers from Victoria and Tasmania registered for the pilot and participated in an online introductory workshop in April 2022. An online self-assessment survey was developed using SurveyMonkey and circulated to pilot producers to complete. The purpose of the survey was to capture information prior to the farm visit and to enable producers, and Greenham, to gauge where they sat against the GBSS.

A monitoring and evaluation plan was developed. Evaluation templates were prepared to enable feedback to be captured from producers during and post the audit visits, in a consistent manner.

Farm visits were scheduled with producers and conducted in May 2022. At the start of each visit producers were asked some questions to determine their current understanding of sustainability, and how sustainable they believed their operation was, and to capture their reasons for participating in the pilot.

Following the farm visits, audit reports were prepared for each participant, reviewed internally and then shared with individual producers. A summary report for Greenham was also prepared by the auditing team, which identified indicators which were not fit for purpose or required some redesign to be more practical or easily interpretable. As part of this process (and also during conversations with producers during the farm visits), areas where support (templates, resources, training) may be required were also identified.

In September 2022, follow up interviews were conducted with pilot producers to understand how producers went about implementing the GBSS on-farm and to identify any potential barriers to adoption. Of the 21 producers involved in the pilot, 18 participated in the final interview.

Final stages of development

Following the pilot, the indicators were reviewed, and some were re-worked and changed. These changes ranged from minor wording changes or changing the tier (level) at which an indicator

was required, through to major re-write (e.g. ground cover). The online self-assessment was also revised both to reflect the changes to indicators but also to ensure that the questions were succinct and easily understood. Appendices to the GBSS were reviewed and edited to ensure they were as useful and accessible as possible. Support templates were prepared to provide producers with a starting point to develop action plans or WH&S policies and procedures (Safe Farming Tasmania templates were used as a basis for the latter). It was a priority to connect producers to existing resources and training opportunities as much as possible (e.g. Australian Feedbase Monitor for measuring ground cover, LPA for biosecurity and farm maps), to prevent duplication and ensure producers can meet other industry standards and requirements through their participation in the GBSS.

Results and discussion

Codesign

Codesign with the producer working group was an iterative process, which evolved as the project progressed. This was due in part to having to adapt to delivering the project during COVID-19, and to respond to the needs of the producer working group and customer demands, and technological or R&D developments (e.g. Australian Feedbase Monitor). In hindsight, having a series of short online meetings with reasonable (10-14 day) breaks in between enabled more in-depth engagement by producers, than a full or even half day workshop could have done. The online meeting format also enabled more inclusive membership of the group (busy-ness or remoteness were not barriers to attending). The process allowed time to read and consider the materials before the meetings, and time for sharing ideas during meetings and reflection following the meeting. For the process to be effective it was critically important that the facilitator be flexible and not come with pre-conceived ideas on the sustainability framework design but be willing to adapt to input from the group. However, it was also important for them to have subject matter expertise to enable them to challenge the producers, interpret key thoughts and frame the discussion, and to prepare for the meetings. Other critical success factors in the codesign process were:

- Pre-reading - to enable time in the meeting to be spent capturing producers' thoughts and feedback. This required producers to commit to completing the pre-reading and come to the meetings prepared, which wasn't a problem as they valued the time to contribute and discuss with each other.
- Breakout groups – to enable producers to share and contribute ideas in small groups, and then summarise findings and key points themselves for reporting back.
- Polls – to quickly capture areas of concern to focus discussion.
- Post meeting wrap-up – to capture key take-aways, concerns and feedback.
- Preparing an agenda and sharing it with the producers ahead of time, but also being prepared to expect the unexpected, and pivot during a meeting as needed to achieve meeting outcomes.

In the initial stages of codesign the working group agreed on the following principles for the sustainability standard. Having these agreed early helped frame the discussion of the group around the design of the sustainability standard framework:

- The program shouldn't be prescriptive. Identify the outcomes that are desired and let producers decide on their own pathway to achieving them.
- Keep it simple, effective, and useful.
- Be careful not to exclude people – the program will need to deal with complexity and diversity of different businesses (regions and enterprises).
- Two-way educational opportunities should be built into this process. This would involve educating customers on the sustainability of the Grenham beef production systems and supporting producers improve their knowledge in some areas (e.g. greenhouse gases).
- The framework should bring producers on a journey, which recognises their individual starting points (baseline) and provides the opportunity for them to progress and improve.
- Focus on what the customer wants to know (and are prepared to pay for).
- Minimise compliance costs.

The Greenham Beef Sustainability Standard

Following the codesign process, the draft GBSS consisted of three tiers, across themes of economic resilience, animal welfare, environmental stewardship and people and community. An outline of the GBSS is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary explanation of the GBSS

Tier	Focus of tier	Theme	Number of indicators
1	Prioritises education and planning and sets the foundation for sustainable management in the NEVER EVER supply chain.	animal welfare	1
		economic resilience	2
		environmental stewardship	12
		people and community	2
2	Supports producers to set goals, identify relevant strategies and implement monitoring processes. Beef from accredited tier 2 properties is eligible for an on-pack 'Certified Regenerative' claim.	animal welfare	2
		economic resilience	2
		environmental stewardship	15
		people and community	3
3	Prioritises continuous improvement, striving for optimum ecological health, carbon neutrality and best practice financial, people, and safety management.	animal welfare	1
		economic resilience	2
		environmental stewardship	6
		people and community	2

Piloting

The 21 pilot producers selected provided enough diversity to be representative of the Greenham supply chain:

- There were 11 Tasmanian, eight Victorian and two NSW producers.
- Number of breeding animals in herds ranged from 65 to 4,100.
- Number of animals finished and sold ranged from 50 to 2,200 each year.
- Production systems included both regenerative and traditional management practices.
- Eighty-one percent both breeding and finishing, 14% finishing only and 5% breeding only.
- Producer age range from mid-20s through to late-60s.
- Mix of British and European cattle breeds represented.
- Education of producers ranged from completion of high school through to university degree.

Even though the GBSS was developed with producer and technical expert input, piloting on farm highlighted challenges with implementation of some indicators across different businesses and geographies. For example, feedback from pilot producers highlighted that 'healthy waterways' requirements didn't account for differences in topography or allow for flexibility in managing seasonal variations. In response, some language was modified to make these indicators more practical to implement for producers with undulating/hilly country or river frontage. Producer feedback from the pilot process was addressed before the GBSS was launched, ensuring the resulting standards are practical and rigorous, and more likely to be adopted by beef producers.

The pilot participants were all receptive to the concept of a sustainability standard. There was an understanding of the need for proof to demonstrate action on farm, and the need to see on farm outcomes in addition to records, and verbal discussions with producers. While most said they saw benefits beyond the financial premium, having a premium attached to accreditation was a critical incentive for participation. Other benefits identified by pilot producers included:

- Synergies with other accreditation programs/industries (e.g. wool).
- Understanding industry direction regarding sustainability.
- Feeling closer to market/customer needs/trends (market access).
- Benchmarking against industry best practice.
- Social/environmental responsibility.
- Providing structure to abstract thoughts and ideas about on-farm sustainability.
- Incentive to action things on the 'to-do' list.
- Alignment with business vision/direction.
- Remaining competitive (both personally and on an industry/global scale).

The pilot evaluation also identified potential barriers to adoption. These included a lack of time, misconceptions about sustainability, lack of technical ability/experience with record keeping and process or computer literacy, as well as not understanding production benefits associated with sustainable practices.

The pilot process found areas where there were gaps in producers' knowledge, or adoption of best practice. Sixty-seven percent of the pilot participants said at least one requirement or area of the standard was unfamiliar to them. Key gaps included carbon, workplace health and safety (WH&S), nutrient budgeting, language and key concepts around grazing management, and soil microbiology. Given the guiding principles established by the producer working group, it means

the GBSS is probably pitched about right if two thirds of pilot producers are exposed to something new (or “stretched”) as a result of their participation. However, the proportion “stretched” in the general supply chain is likely to be higher, given most of the pilot participants had a specific interest in being involved.

Tools and templates will be key to adoption of the GBSS, with almost all pilot participants requesting simple templates, training, guides, and examples. Some also suggested local producer working groups. There is an opportunity to establish a process to better support producers to address opportunities for improvement identified during audits of the GBSS. Resources, such as e-learning modules and producer workshops, to help address adoption needs, are already under development. These are leveraging existing programs and resources as much as possible. As an example, the MLA carbon e-learning modules were developed as a direct result of this project ([carbon sense](#) and [carbon 101](#)), by the GBSS project team members. These modules are available for all of industry but are a requirement for producers to complete to achieve GBSS accreditation.

The self-assessment was found to be useful for producers to identify any gaps or areas for improvement ahead of being audited for the GBSS. They can then target specific templates and resources to help them address these.

All the pilot participants said the GBSS required them to do more record keeping, or record more detail, than they did currently. However, all indicated that they felt the requirements were manageable if the right systems and templates were set up from the start, and staff were trained in the new processes. Eighty-two percent of respondents said compliance to the standard had not been overly costly to-date (over and above their normal operational costs), and that they didn't see it costing them more over and above already planned spending (although some did note that it brought forward the timeline for purchases or actions).

The tier-based approach worked well; allowing for an accessible starting point, while also providing goals to work towards. Some pilot producers even saw tier 3 as an opportunity to acknowledge and reward producers who have gone the extra mile and are doing great things, and as such shouldn't be too easy to achieve.

The Greenham Beef Sustainability Standard

Following the pilot, the GBSS was revised to address the feedback received from both producers and auditors. Additionally, for some indicators, such as biodiversity and carbon, there have been significant developments since the GBSS was first drafted and these needed to be captured to ensure the GBSS remained up to date. The three tiers are an important element of the standard, with tier one providing an accessible entry point, while tier three provides ambitious stretch targets for leading producers. Tier two was designed with customer demands in mind, and incorporates regenerative agriculture principles. Producers who achieve tiers two or three are eligible for premium payments under a regenerative agriculture label. The GBSS will be third-party audited and has been endorsed by US animal welfare program, Certified Humane®, and environmental and agricultural specialists, Integrity Ag & Environment. Pilot producers are now in the process of being fully accredited against the final GBSS, and wider rollout of the GBSS to Greenham suppliers is underway. All but three of the pilot producers have decided to progress to full accreditation under the final GBSS.

Conclusion

This project has highlighted the opportunity for market pull-through to drive adoption. This incentivisation relates not only to price but also includes:

- opportunities for self-improvement/accountability
- recognition for industry best practice
- being industry leaders
- supporting more informed decision making
- enabling benchmarking of performance
- meeting market demands
- supporting the industry
- improved efficiencies
- business resilience.

The project also highlights the importance of genuine and rigorous codesign with producers to ensure buy-in. The design phase of the GBSS allowed ample time for in-depth codesign with producers, and consultation with customers and technical experts. The piloting of the standard on-farm enabled refining not only of the standard itself but also processes and supporting resources and materials. As a result, the GBSS is practical, relevant, and rigorous. Engaging producers through the development of the sustainability standard has also created producer

'champions' for the GBSS, which will help to encourage uptake once it is formally launched. Being able to share the experiences of pilot producers has helped to allay concerns and answer questions both internally and externally.

The GBSS project has been beneficial for the livestock industry as a whole; supporting industry goals to demonstrate 'green credentials'. Not only is the GBSS technically rigorous in the indicators being applied, but the support and encouragement provided to participating producers will help to drive adoption of best practice. Based on pilot feedback, the three tiers of the standard ensure it is accessible for most producers at tier one, while tiers two and three will require additional effort to achieve, above business as usual. The supporting resources, information and templates and links to training opportunities encourage and support producers to embark on a learning journey, using the GBSS to benchmark their progress. The GBSS moves beyond a 'tick box' compliance approach for sustainability to proactively drive uptake of best practice amongst the supply chain.

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