

# **Farmlink: Connecting Clients with Current Cost-Effective Information**

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### *Abstract*

*Increasing numbers of primary producers are being connected to the Internet . Results of a survey conducted with DPI registered clients indicate that up to 22% of clients currently have an email address and a further 30% intend to connect by October 1999.*

*Producers currently connected to the internet are requesting that DPI information be emailed to them rather than faxed. The current costs in terms of time and resources in providing a paper based information service are a concern to the authors. Clients have also requested that the information be delivered more efficiently.*

*The Farmlink initiative is described and is proposed as a way of addressing the issues of cost and currency of information.*

## **Introduction**

In October 1998 the Department of Primary Industries (DPI) conducted a survey to explore the potential of the internet as a means to improve information delivery and communication with clients. Results of the survey indicated that clients are now connecting to the Internet in increasing numbers. This is occurring in an environment where clients are being exposed to emerging technologies and where training is being provided by a range of projects.

FarmLink, a new internet based communication and information delivery system which responds to this changing environment, is described.

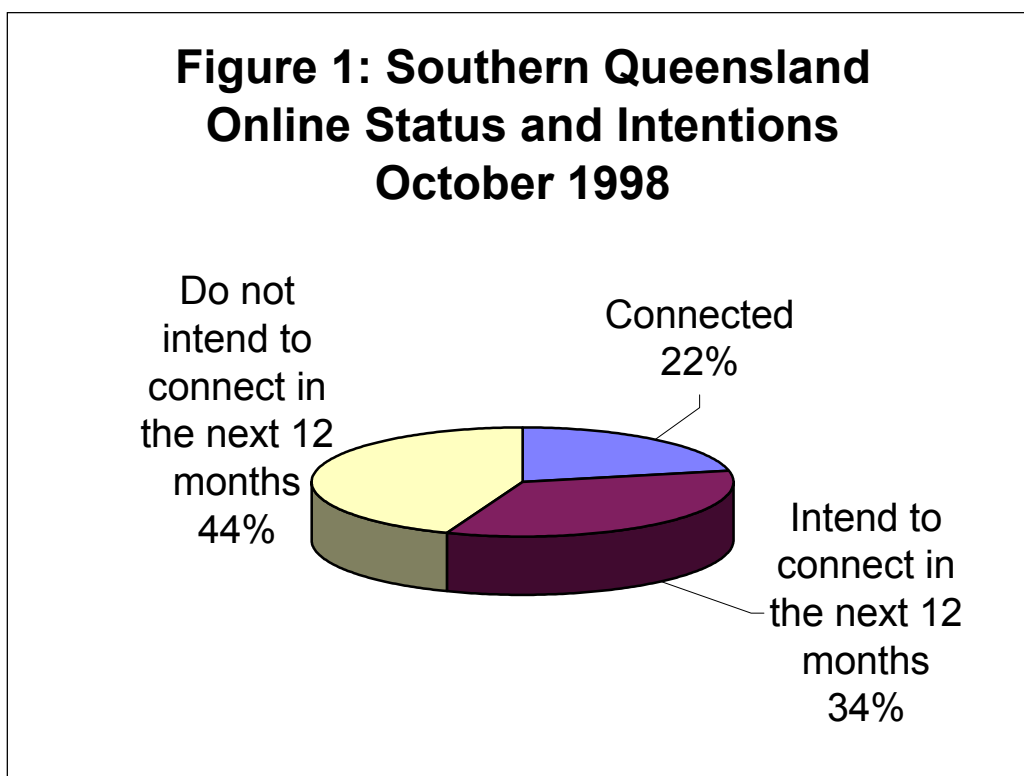
## **Survey Outline**

The DPI Call Centre interviewed 101 clients in CQ and 105 clients in SQ. The farmers were interviewed by phone and were randomly selected from a list of registered clients.

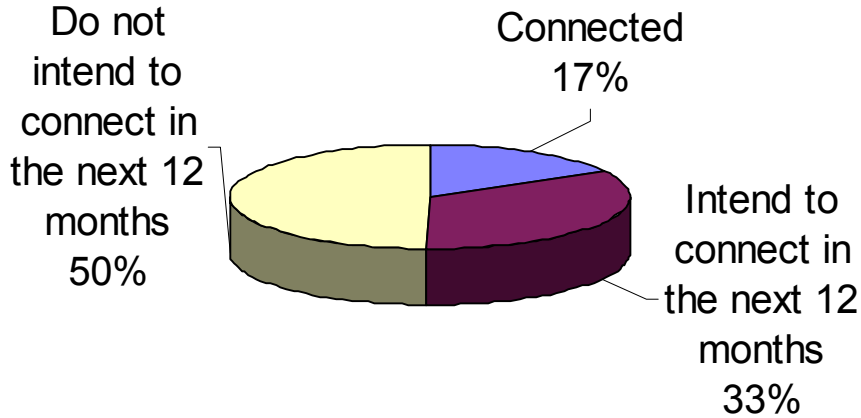
## Survey Results

### *Online Status*

The survey results indicated that 17% of producers surveyed in CQ and 22% of producers in South Qld had an email address as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2. A further 34% of those surveyed indicated that they intended to connect in the next 12 months. Potentially, this means that in the next 12 months half the DPI's clients could have an email address.



**Figure 2: Central Queensland  
Online Status and Intentions  
October 1998**



These results are similar to the results of other studies as outlined in Table 1, with a range from 6.9 %to 21%.

**Table 1 Other Relevant Research**

Research	Numbers connected to the Internet
Australian Bureau of Statistics (1996) Household Use of Information Technology	6.9%
Garnaut, J & Rasheed, C ABARE Farm Survey Report (1996,97)	9.2%
Farmwide Pty Ltd (1997)	18%
Malcolm Martin (Masters Dissertation 1998)	17.5%
Poll Hereford Society (Kauter, J pers comm 1999)	21%

The trend since 1996 as shown in Table 1 shows that Australian primary producers are becoming users of computers in their farming business and that a significant proportion of these farmers then connect to the Internet.

***Factors relating to connection decisions***

The main benefits in connecting to the Internet as identified by producers in this survey, were related to:

- accessing business and marketing information (19%), and
- communication, education and social advantages (7%).

Other reasons for connection are outlined in Table 2.

**Table 2 Reasons for Connecting to the Internet**

<b>Reasons for intending to connect</b>	<b>CQ</b>	<b>SQ</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Information, Marketing, Weather	13.8%	17%	Access information that is current, use it for marketing research Keep up with weather, also cattle advertised on web Find it interesting, gather information
Education	6%	0%	Children on school of the air, keep up with education Kids can use it for research
Email Communication Social	2%	4%	Wife would like to connect for information, email Access to family communication on the email
Use in the Business	4%	3%	email and FarmFax To email the DPI web site

The reasons cited for those not intending to connect in the next 12 months were related to:

- cost and lack of skills (37%) or;
- lack of interest and the poor infrastructure (10%).

Further details with clients' comments are outlined in Table 3, below.

**Table 3 Reasons for not connecting to the Internet**

<b>Reasons for not connecting</b>	<b>CQ</b>	<b>SQ</b>	<b>Comments</b>
No Skills Lack of equipment	18%	21%	Computer illiterate No computer
Financial No service provider	13%	22%	Expensive STD rates Computers too expensive and technology changes too quickly Cost of timed local calls
Not interested in computers	6%	6%	Not interested in purchasing a computer Too old, not interested Not interested, old fashioned
Infrastructure (phone lines)	6%	2%	Cannot get connected. Need the phone system upgraded. Will get modem if the phone lines improve Telephone network does not support it
No answer	24%	13%	
Other	6%	12%	Too time consuming Eventually Sign of the times

Other anecdotal indications that producers are beginning to feel confident in using email include:

- Producers have requested that the DPI facsimile information service (FarmFax) be emailed rather than faxed;
- Producers have asked for the FarmTech service to be available on the web; and
- The Tropical Beef Centre information service reports that a producer emailed an attached gif file. The graphic was a picture of a weed which the client wanted identified. (Larner, T. pers comm)

Other relevant research has found that

- producer marketing groups are seeing the benefit of email and are using email in preference to broadcast fax for cost and convenience reasons. (Gregor, S & Jones, K 1997); and
- women are more likely to be the users of computers (Easdown, W 1999)

Factors which could be contributing to the increasing numbers of DPI clients who are connecting to the Internet are:

- Increased availability of training due to the State and Commonwealth Government initiatives; and
- Other community initiated projects which access Commonwealth Government funding.

Primary producers in rural areas are now assessing whether a connection to the internet can improve their lifestyle. Their reasons for connecting are predominantly business, education and socially related. Approximately 25% of survey respondents connected for these reasons. (Wilson, 1998)

The fact that web addresses are advertised in the print and electronic media is also increasing the awareness of the information available on the internet.

## **DPI Trial -Farmlink**

The developments mentioned above and the results of the client survey opens opportunities for information providers to communicate with a growing segment of their target audience from their computer. In response to these findings DPI has developed a new segmented database/e-mail communication service called Farmlink, potentially for use by all people with an interest in primary industries in Queensland. This prototype could generate a major improvement in two way communication with the following advantages:

- Cost effective, fast and simple to use. DPI can provide unlimited e-mail communication for a fixed annual cost of \$12,000 per year;
- More frequent and better targeted communication;
- The sender has control of their message. It is not distorted by the newspaper or other media;
- Accuracy and currency of the information. This is a major concern for producers and would add considerable value to the extension product;

*"The bloke at Birdsville is as up to date as the bloke in Brisbane" (Kauter, J pers comm)*

- Available for use by world wide information providers who have an interest in Queensland primary industry.

### ***Prototype features and future development***

This service is for use by all people with a interest in Queensland primary industry. Information is sent via the Farmlink web site by DPI and other information providers, and is received by registered users via either email or fax.

Currently Farmlink is a working prototype, which we are developing, in close consultation with Queensland primary producers and agribusiness during 1999. The service commenced operation in June 1999 and currently has approximately 2000 registered users . The web site is located at [farmlink.dpi.qld.gov.au](http://farmlink.dpi.qld.gov.au). Clients with internet access can register and profile their mix of interests directly on the site. Those without internet access can ring the DPI Call Centre and be registered to receive information by fax.

Farmlink uses segmentation so clients can profile their specific mix of interests from the selection provided and in so doing receive information on those topics only, thus avoiding information overload. There are three types of segmentation to help ensure sent messages are as well targeted as possible. They include:

- 1) **Interest category**, for example, agricultural production , marketing and trade information , saleable products and services and industry news and updates.
- 2) **Subject area**, for example cereal grain crops, beef cattle, sheep, vegetables, cotton, weather and climate etc
- 3) **Geographic location**, based on the users post code

To use Farmlink to send a message, users access the Farmlink web site then simply create an email message, select the category, subject area and geographic location targeted to receive the message, and then send. Farmlink will tell the sender the number of clients receiving the message based on the segment selected. For example:

- A DPI beef extension officer from Roma creates an email invitation to a beef breeding workshop. To send the invitation to the appropriate group, the officer selects the **category** of production , the **subject** of beef and the **postcodes** around Roma.
- A plum importer from Hong Kong wants three containers of Australian plums a month. He creates his e-mail message, attaches a photo of the desired plum type, quality and packaging, selects the **category** of trade and marketing, the **subject** of stone fruit and **geographic location** of Australia.

In both these examples, only those people who have expressed their interest in the topics chosen by the sender and who live in the chosen geographic location will receive the messages.

The relationship between the database segments of category,subject and geographic location mean that a particular message can be directed to any one of thousands of different target groups.

Other features of Farmlink available to internet connected users include a live on line chat facility and a segmented notice board that provides a short term store house for current messages.

New features to be developed in the near future include the ability to send attached files and to use E-commerce as part of Farmlink.

## Conclusion

Farmlink is a totally new application with enormous potential to generate a major improvement in two-way communication within primary industry in Queensland and between Queensland Agribusiness and the world.

As more primary producers connect to the Internet, and as we explore new ways of communicating with each other. The convenience, speed and cost effectiveness of email will become more attractive. New applications that further enhance these new technologies and improve peoples ability to communicate, present the next challenge and offer a great opportunity for rural and regional Australia .

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