



Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of attendees of the Irrigation Modernisation Planning Irrigators' Forum and do not necessarily reflect those of the Australian Government or the Minister for Climate Change and Water.

Important considerations for the Modernisation Planning process

Introduction

An Irrigation Modernisation Planning Irrigators' Forum was hosted by the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts (DEWHA) on 29 April 2009. The Forum brought together participants of the Irrigation Modernisation Planning Assistance program (IMPA) to share their experiences of the program and identify the lessons learned through undertaking a modernisation planning process.

The structure of the day saw presentations by several irrigation water providers (IWPs) about the specific lessons they had learned. These lessons have been collated as a means of providing advice to IWPs considering applying under the IMPA Program.

Approach

It is important for IWPs to consider their initial approach to the modernisation planning process.

- Modernisation planning should be viewed as an opportunity to comprehensively examine the operations of the IWP, including layout and function of the irrigation water supply system.
- The aim is to identify changes that can be made to the supply system itself and its operation in order to strengthen viability and efficiency in the face of a future with less water.
- This requires IWPs to 'look outside the square' and be innovative and creative when exploring their options.
- Modernisation planning promotes challenging the status quo within which an organisation has been operating. Questioning existing biases and testing boundaries are critical elements of this challenge.
- It is recommended that IWPs include an independent member who has no ties or personal interest in the organisation in the steering committee for their modernisation planning process. The role of this person is to question existing assumptions and push for the inclusion of critical analysis as necessary to develop a comprehensive modernisation plan.

Overall Messages

- The modernisation planning process has been positive and has allowed IWPs to undertake a level of planning that would not have otherwise have occurred.
- Modernisation planning is a complex process that requires strong project management on the part of the IWP to ensure the Modernisation Plan reflects the needs of their organisation.
- The IWP should consider contingencies to respond to unexpected delays and complications that arise from implementing a project of this scale.
- Project management is improved and made easier by open communication with key stakeholders.
- IWPs should budget adequately for the high level of communication and extension required with irrigation scheme members.

Relationships

The modernisation planning process is undertaken through three key relationships;

1. IWP and DEWHA
2. IWP and consultants, and
3. IWP and its members.

In each of these relationships the IWP needs to be proactive in facilitating open lines of communication between each party to ensure that the expectations of each party are met.

Relationship between the IWP and DEWHA

- IWPs need to keep DEWHA informed of any challenges they are facing in the project management aspect of developing their modernisation plan, as this can allow solutions to be found promptly.
- Experience has shown modernisation planning projects can be difficult to manage. DEWHA should also be made aware of unexpected delays as soon as they occur, whether or not the IWP judges them to be likely to impact on milestone achievements.

Relationship between the IWP and their members

- It is imperative that open communication and discussion is held with members of the IWP's organisation to ensure that their expectations for the IWP and the service it provides are met in the modernisation plan. Negotiations are likely to be needed in matching the expectations of members with those of the IWP and its business aspirations.

Relationship between the IWP and Consultants

Managing consultants is a significant part of developing a modernisation plan. As part of a modernisation planning exercise, the IWPs may use a range of consultants to provide technical and/or project management assistance. Management of consultants has been identified as one of the key challenges in the process by IWPs who have participated in the IMPA program so far.

- Don't underestimate the knowledge contained within the IWP and its members; make use of that knowledge in the project. The consultant should work with the IWP in a collaborative way rather than at arms length.
- Selection of the correct consultant is critical. Decisions need to consider the experience and qualification of the potential consultant, their ability to dedicate sufficient time and resources to the project and the reputation of the consultant. Consideration should be given to specifying the actual personnel who will do the work rather than just contracting an organisation.
- The role of the consultant should be clearly defined from the outset of the project. The IWP is responsible for the drive and direction of the project and it is the IWP that provides this direction to the consultant and leads the project. A lack of time spent by the consultant in the IWPs actual district was mentioned as an issue by several IWPs.
- Regular communication helps monitor the focus and progress of consultants.

Project Management

Project management issues were raised as a major factor for consideration for IWPs that are beginning the modernisation planning process. The most critical element was listed as time management.

Time management

- The most significant risk to the process was underestimating the timeframe needed to develop a modernisation plan that meets the needs of stakeholders and is delivered on budget.
- A schedule of milestones for the project is developed following a process of negotiation between the IWP and DEWHA. Therefore the IWP must give careful consideration to the timeframes that will be necessary for the completion of these milestone activities and allow some time for unexpected delays.
- Inherent in this issue of time management is an understanding of the timeframes required for DEWHA's internal review of documents as well as for departmental processes required to respond to proposed contract and budget variations.

Governance

- It is recommended that an experienced project manager be sought for the project, whether this is a person internal or external to the IWP.
- The governance structure describing the reporting processes within the IWP should be clearly established from the beginning of the project, and the roles and responsibilities of each person clarified.
- IWPs are urged to appoint one or more external people with appropriate experience onto the project steering committee to assist with good governance.
- IWPs will need to monitor the progress of the project manager throughout the process.