Entry type: Organisation
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Victorian Rural Women’s Network

(1986 -)

Born	19860101, Victoria Australia
Occupation	Rural organisation, Social action organisation, Women's organisation

Summary

The first Rural Women’s Network was established in Victoria in 1986, under the auspices of the Office of Rural Affairs in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, in response to activism by Victorian rural women, including Mary Salce. The aim was to link rural women’s groups and individuals into a loose network supported by government infrastructure, to enable the sharing of ideas, issues, information and support, and to encourage women to develop a more active voice in government decision-making.

Details

In 1986, the newly elected Victorian Labor Government established the Office of Rural Affairs (ORA) within the Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, to more equitably meet needs of rural Victorians. The Rural Affairs Committee of Cabinet included two femocrats – Joan Kirner and Caroline Hogg – who insisted on a strong focus on the needs of rural women. The Office of Rural Affairs’ first major project was to encourage the involvement of rural women in public life, and two staff members of ORA, Jenni Mitchell and Anna Lottkowitz, were appointed to develop the Rural Women’s Network (RWN). Working through personal contact, they purposefully developed a networking facility, which would link women and organisations, and belong to all, rather than a hierarchical organisation.

IN March 1987, The RWN produced NETWORK newsletter as a forum for rural women, in Jenni Mitchell’s words, ‘to share concerns and develop their own solutions’. The newsletter gave rural women both a powerful voice, and the space to develop a women’s discourse.

Locally, the network assisted groups to explore issues of concern, and to plan activities. In this year they secured the services of two women with expertise in small business management, and supported workshops.

In 1990, the Network began its support of the annual Victorian Women on Farms Gatherings: the coming together of women in conference style, consciousness raising groups, where women could also gain information and practical skills. A year later (1991) the RWN conducted the Women in Action program, to broaden the skills base of women wishing to participate in public life, in conjunction with a number of other women’s organisations.

Liz Hogan, who joined the Network in 1990, in 1992 facilitated a state wide meeting in Ballarat of activists, women’s group leaders and academics. This meeting had far-reaching consequences, including the formation of the Australian Women in Agriculture organisation, and the committee for the organisation of the First International Women in Agriculture Conference, out of which came the Foundation for Australian Agricultural Women. Networks followed in other states in the 1990s, including New South Wales (1992), Western Australia (1996), and Queensland (1993).

From 1992 the Network was overseen by a women’s reference group, which met 2-3 times per year. It included women from outside the Department, such as representatives of peak women’s organisations, regional issue-based groups, individual women and women from other relevant government departments. The ORA workers met with rural women, listening to their concerns, and providing advice to the Rural Affairs Committee of Cabinet. The femocrats within the Network provided advice and assistance in gaining funding, influencing politicians and bureaucrats and negotiating the system.

In 2002 the Rural Women’s Network moved to the Department for Victorian Communities, now the Department of Planning and Community Development. The Victorian Rural Women’s Network has continued its role of advising governments on issues affecting rural women, helping to develop action plans with a focus on women in agriculture and resource management, and empowering, linking and supporting rural women.

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Report
The invisible farmer : a report on Australian farm women, Williams, Julie, 1992

Book
Breaking Through the Grass Ceiling: Women, Power & Leadership in Rural Australia, Alston, Margaret, 2000

Edited Book
Country women at the crossroads: Perspectives on the lives of rural Australian Women in the 1990s, Franklin, Margaret-Ann, Short, Leonie M. and Teather, Elizabeth K., 1995

Book Section
Mitchell, Jenni, Grass Roots and Government Initiative: Victoria's Rural Women's Network, 1995

Site Exhibition
Brilliant Ideas and Huge Visions: ABC Radio Australian Rural Women of the Year - 1994-1997, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2011,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/rwya/rwya-home.html

Archival resources

Public Record Office Victoria, Victorian Archives Centre
Rural Womens Network

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