

FUTURE OF ORBOST & DISTRICT PROJECT



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A recent workshop in Sale brought together stakeholders from across the industrial hemp value chain, along with other interested parties, to explore a small-scale, end-to-end hemp pilot in Orbost & District. Led by local farmer Stan Weatherall's trial crop, the workshop embraced the principles of collaboration and place-based economy to identify how this pilot could explore further opportunities for the region.

Facilitated by Dr. Nicola Watts, Project Lead for the Future of Orbost & District (FoOD), and delivered in partnership with Food & Fibre Gippsland, the event engaged participants in a co-design process aimed at addressing the challenges of the emerging industrial hemp industry in Victoria.

Food & Fibre Gippsland, in collaboration with the Latrobe Valley Authority (LVA), has been conducting a context analysis to explore potential opportunities for industrial hemp in Gippsland. Hemp has been identified as a key focus for economic diversification under the FoOD project. The workshop sought to initiate practical, action-oriented steps to build on these opportunities.

Hemp is recognized as a fast-growing, sustainable crop, maturing in just 4 months compared to decades for trees. Its versatility includes uses in paper, textiles, and building materials, all with a significantly lower environmental footprint. As an alternative to timber, hemp absorbs CO₂, enhances soil health, and requires fewer resources, offering an eco-friendly option for industries like construction.

While its potential is clear, the hemp industry faces several hurdles. It struggles with a "chicken-and-egg" dilemma—no mature supply chain exists due to the lack of a developed market, and vice versa. In addition, regulatory barriers and the need for value-chain integration add complexity to scaling the industry.

Local construction business Built QA expressed strong interest, particularly in materials showcased by innovative companies like Hexcore, which produce hemp-based building products.

Ms. Liz Mitchell, Chair of the FoOD Project's Governance Group, highlighted hemp's role as a focal point for the project's Agricultural Innovation Working Group. "Hemp is exciting, but it's a great example of why collaboration across stakeholders is essential," said Ms. Mitchell. "We also need to rethink the idea that everything must be done at large scale. Distributed scale, where local opportunities like hemp growing and processing can plug into a larger industry, holds great potential."

By the end of the workshop, participants agreed on a collaborative path forward, with a commitment to transform the small upcoming local Spring hemp crop into products for showcasing through the local construction sector.

“This small-scale pilot won’t be sustainable on its own long-term, but it will strengthen relationships within the supply chain, and allow us to test, learn, and refine processes,” Ms. Mitchell said. “There’s still work to be done, but the energy and spirit of collaboration in the room were very encouraging.”

The Future of Orbost & District project responds to the challenges posed by the end of native timber harvesting in Victoria’s state forests, focusing on transitioning the local economy. Its goal is to build on Orbost and District’s existing strengths and leverage opportunities for positive economic, social, and environmental outcomes. The project receives support from the Victorian Government’s Forestry Transition Program’s Community Stream until September 2025.

The Orbost and District Chamber of Commerce and Industry has an agreement with the Department of Energy Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) to deliver the Future of Orbost & District project, which is overseen by a community-led governance group.

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<photos supplied>





Participants in the room at the hemp c-design workshop