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THE WESTERN CATCHMENT MANAGEMENT AUTHORITY'S INCENTIVES PROGRAM: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT FROM THE PAST THREE YEARS...

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INTRODUCTION

The Western Catchment Management Authority (WCMA) is the statutory body that engages the regional community in natural resource management. It is also the primary vehicle for the delivery of incentive programs funded by both the NSW and Commonwealth Governments to achieve restoration and improvements in the natural resources of the State (WCMA 2007).

The WCMA is the largest catchment in NSW and covers some 230,000 square kilometres (see Figure I). Although not a 'true' catchment, it does encompass some major river systems such as the Barwon-Darling, Culgoa, Paroo, Warrego, Bokhara, Birrie and the Narran.

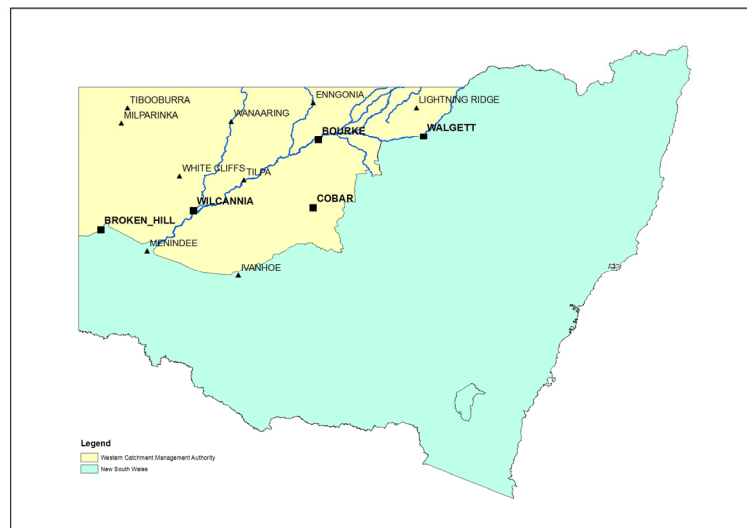


Figure I. Western Catchment Management Authority area.

Priority issues for the Western Catchment include total grazing pressure, maintenance and restoration of perennial pastures, pest animal and plants, water quality, sustainable management of groundwater resources, riverine and aquatic biodiversity, terrestrial biodiversity, sustainable irrigated and dryland agriculture and preservation of cultural heritage. Each of these issues fall within four broad Themes: Land and Vegetation; Rivers and Groundwater; Biodiversity and Community (see Table I).

The WCMA's Incentives Program provides the platform to channel funds to on-ground natural resource works. In addition to their own Incentives, the WCMA also administers and coordinates the delivery of National Landcare Program (NLP) funds. On-ground project works are funded if they comply and help achieve the specific Management Targets listed under each of the aforementioned Themes. To date, the WCMA has conducted four major funding rounds (2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008), totalling around 12 million dollars. Between 2005 and 2007, nearly 200 applicants have been successful in receiving funds to carry out on-ground works. Prior to 2007, the Incentives Program was offered with just one application form and all types of projects were assessed, ordered and ranked against each other by just one assessment panel. Based on community and staff feedback, the 2007 Incentives was split into the ten different Management Targets (see Table I) with each Target given a specific application form and assessment process.

Table I. Summary of Western Catchment Management Authority Themes, Catchment and Management Targets (extract WCMA 2007).

Themes	Catchment Targets	Programs	Management Targets
Land & Vegetation	CT1: Quality and quantity of vegetation managed to maintain and/or improve designated cover capable of preventing soil erosion (i.e. designated cover greater than or equal to 40%).	1 Sustainable Agriculture	1 Sustainable Agriculture Management practice carried out by 50% of landholders by 2016.
		2 Landscape Management	2 Maintain or rehabilitate one million hectares of native pasture vegetation communities by 2016.
		3 Pests	3 No increase in the number of species or extent of pest weeds or animals above current levels and a reduction in the impact of pest species.
Rivers & Groundwater	CT2: The Surface Water System Health Index Rating and the Groundwater System Health Index Rating improved at 60 % of relevant monitoring sites and maintained at all other monitoring sites by 2016	4 Aquatic Habitat	4 Habitat improvement actions implemented on 20% of identified priority areas of stream, floodplain, wetland and riparian areas by 2016.
		5 Water Quality and Salinity	5 Water Quality and salinity levels meeting ANZECC drinking water and recreational use criteria for greater than 95% of the time at key town use sites by 2016.
	CT3: Salinity in the Barwon-Darling at Wilcannia less than 800EC for 80% of the time as measured on a daily basis and less than 350EC for 50% of the time by the year 2016.	6 Surface Water Management	6 Flow sharing arrangements including Water Sharing Plans implemented by DNR for all priority streams by 2010, with endorsement from Western CMA on water management issues which affect the catchment community.
		7 Groundwater Management	7 Water Pressure Stabilised in key regions of the Great Artesian Basin, as defined by NSW Great Artesian Basin Advisory Committee, by 2016.
Biodiversity	CT4a: Ecological communities of high conservation value are adequately protected.	8 High Conservation Value Areas	8 Ecological communities of high conservation value (including threatened species) are identified within 3 years of Catchment Plan approval and adequately protected throughout the catchment by negotiation with landholders, within 8 years of Catchment Plan approval.
	CT4b: In each of the other ecological communities, 12% of the area will be managed for conservation within 10 years of Catchment Plan approval and 25% within 25 years of Catchment Plan approval.	9 Conservation Land Use	9 An ongoing program is established that allows landholders to incorporate lands managed for conservation as an alternative land use and part of a viable enterprise, within two years of Catchment Plan approval.
Community		10 Cultural Heritage	10 Establish an Indigenous Natural Resource and Cultural Reference Group, within 2 years of Catchment Plan approval to formally coordinate the input of Aboriginal communities into natural resource management planning activities in the Western Catchment.
			11 Develop and assist the implementation of a process for the documentation, evaluation and ownership of indigenous knowledge of sustainable land management and cultural values in the Western Catchment by 2009.
		11 Community Education	12 There is a continual increase in land managers' awareness, knowledge and skills in NRM and adoption of practices which improve natural resource outcomes.
			13 Land managers and other natural resource managers are actively engaged in collaborative action to improve the management of natural resources through the development and implementation of regionally relevant NRM.
14 There is a continual increase in the willingness of land managers, other stakeholders and the community to partner NRM organisations to deliver natural resource outcomes.			
12 Monitoring & Evaluation	Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting strategy to be developed		

In November 2007, the Western CMA completed an evaluation of its Incentives Program. The key objectives of the evaluation were to:

1. determine how adequately the Program is meeting needs of WCMA Catchment Plan;
2. assess the adequacy of the Program's delivery and Program structure; and
3. determine how effective recent changes in the Program structure has been in engaging the community (Pearson 2007).

The evaluation sought comments from 12 district and regional staff, four assessment Panel participants and five landholders (Pearson 2007). Despite some 2008 data being included in this paper, this summary is based on the evaluation completed for the three years prior.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The evaluation found that there has been a gradual increase in the number of project applications received in each of the four funding rounds, however, in 2007 and 2008 some individual landholders submitted multiple applications (see Table II). The proportion of these applicants that were new to the WCMA Incentives Program (i.e. those that have never applied for WCMA funding through Incentives) has however decreased from 85% in 2005 to 50% in 2007 and 46% in 2008 (see Table II).

Is this an acceptable level of engagement and should the WCMA be seeing this decline in just four years of the Program? Over time, the WCMA ultimately aims to engage the vast majority of the catchment's stakeholders and a natural decline will continue. Based on this evaluation, the WCMA consider engagement levels of greater than 50% up until 2008 as satisfactory, especially since our Incentives Program is just one component of the total broad-scale and targeted activities we perform. The evaluation highlighted that geographically there were gaps in engagement levels across the catchment and that more work was needed to improve Indigenous engagement. To build on this engagement level and to motivate and encourage those that have not yet participated in our Incentive Program, case-studies of successful projects have been produced and distributed. Primary inhibitors to participation in our Incentives Program are difficulty in filling out application forms, perceived inconsistencies between projects that get funded each year, perceived lack of feedback and difficulty in differentiating between NRM activities and normal property management (Pearson 2007). To further encourage participation and recognising the high up-front costs of on-ground works for the landholder, the WCMA increased the first contractual payment from 50% of the total cost to 75%, with the remainder paid upon completion. With respect to the recent changes of having ten tailored application forms to reflect each of the 10 Management Targets (as opposed to one), the evaluation found that it was easier to compare like projects, improved marking consistency and enabled specific experts to be targeted as assessment panel members.

Table II: The number of applications received for each major funding round

	2005	2006	2007	2008
No. of applications received	125	135	146	141
No. of new landholders	106	85	73	64
Percentage of applicants that are new to CMA funding	85	63	50	46

WCMA CATCHMENT NEEDS AND TARGETS

In terms of whether the Incentives Program is meeting the targets of the Catchment Plan, it was found that the WCMA's landscape and pest management targets are on track to be reached. However, the WCMA may have difficulty attaining the sustainable agriculture target if new landholders are not engaged. Water quality targets may be difficult to attain due to the limited nature of works that the WCMA can fund that have an influence instream. Water Quality was also one of the most underspent programs in 2007 (see Table III). Pests were also underspent in 2007 despite our evaluation revealing that the WCMA is on track to reach its Target. The greatest expenditure in relation to funds available was in the riverine habitat and native pasture themes (Table III). To facilitate spending in underspent themes and to address the variable cost sharing of public versus private benefit, the WCMA offered in its 2007 and 2008 Incentives Program, variable funding ratio's (Table IV). For example, for every

dollar an applicant contributed to a Riparian and Water Quality project, the WCMA gave three, thus recognising the need to increase projects in this program and the high public benefit they provide through improved riparian and aquatic habitats.

Table III: A comparison of the funding availability to the funding allocation for 2007 (Pearson 2007)

	Funds Available (\$)	Funds Spent (\$)	Funds Remaining (\$)	Percentage of funds spent (%)
Sustainable Agriculture	936,240	830,761	105,479	89
Native Pastures	1,236,000	1,120,577	115,423	91
Pests	1,088,990	919,988	169,002	84
Riverine Habitat	1,092,000	1,051,279	40,721	96
Water Quality	519,230	367,919	151,311	71

Table IV: Number of dollars allocated and funding ratio for a selection of major Programs in 2007 and 2008*

Incentive Program	No. of applications received / Funds allocated / WMCA:landholder contribution ratio	
	2007	2008*
Groundcover Management	65 / \$2.0 million / 1:1 or 2:1	63 / \$2.4 million / 1:1 or 2:1
Riparian and Water Quality	22 / \$1.42 million / 3:1	21 / \$1.1 million / 3:1
Invasive Native Scrub	23 / \$440,500 / 2:1	27 / \$900,000 / 2:1
Pests	5 / \$180,000 / 2:1	6 / \$216,000 / 2:1
Rangeland Rehabilitation	4 / \$80,400 / 2:1	6 / \$160,000 / 2:1
Conservation Farming	6 / \$135,000 / 1:1	5 / \$57,000 / 1:1

* Tentative amounts. Actual dollars not yet allocated.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND DELIVERY

The evaluation made a number of suggestions for how the delivery and process of the Incentives Program could be improved. Extracted from Pearson 2007, they were:

1. A system needs to be developed and implemented to assess contract compliance with respect to project outcomes;
2. A WCMA policy is required to outline the repercussions for landholders who do not meet their contractual requirements (in process);
3. The WCMA needs to consider what the focus of future rounds will be to reflect changes in catchment issues;
4. The WCMA needs to improve its administration and internal procedures relating to the processing and communication of applications;
5. Hold staff workshops prior to the opening of each Incentives Program to brief staff on the requirements and guidelines for each sub-program. Landholder workshops are mandatory to assist first-time applicants with their submissions; and
6. Clear guidelines need to be produced to ensure consistency across funding rounds, assist decision making and clarify exactly what will be funded in relation to particular on-ground activities.

The WCMA will continue to learn from its experiences and will conduct periodic reviews of all their on-going activities, especially the Incentives and Community Education and Extension Programs. The evolution of the Incentives Program illustrates how the WCMA uses adaptive management cycles.

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