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Engaging landholders in managing areas of high conservation value in the Western Catchment

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Abstract

Engaging landholders in the Western NSW rangelands in previously believed “green” conservation programs, has been limited in the past. The Western Catchment Management Authority’s High Conservation Value financial incentive program is working to change this. By building relationships with landholders through a partnership approach led by enthusiastic district staff, an increasing number of landholders are participating in conservation management on their properties. Providing financial incentives for conservation outcomes has led to over 35 properties involved encompassing over 21 000 hectares of sites. Places of ecological and cultural importance are being added to the program, which from a slow beginning is now gaining momentum and diversity in the types of landholders engaged and sites included.

Introduction

The Western Catchment Management Authority (Western CMA) is one of 56 regional natural resource management bodies in Australia and has the responsibility for engaging the catchment community in natural resource management issues, the Western CMA is guided by the Western Catchment Action Plan (CAP) (Western Catchment Management Authority 2007) which was developed with extensive community involvement. Incentive programs funded by NSW and Australian governments along with community education and support, as well as the

development of Property Vegetation Plans (PVP) form the major component of the CMA's activities.

The CAP sets out a range of catchment targets and management targets, against which achievements are measured. The CAP contains two targets relating to management of areas of high conservation value that include threatened species. These targets form part of the Western CMA biodiversity program, which aims to address biodiversity issues within the catchment. The High Conservation Value (HCV) incentive program is the primary mechanism for delivering these targets. The HCV program has been delivered in the catchment since 2005. However, until 2008, take-up by landholders had been poor. In 2008 and 2009, the HCV programs had significantly increased uptake due to a range of factors. The program has now resulted in significant conservation values being managed by landholders across the catchment on 35 properties. This paper will outline the key conservation issues and values in the catchment, outline the history and current status of the HCV program and provide 4 case study examples of where landholders are engaged in conservation activities in the Western Catchment.

Conservation issues in the Western Catchment

Native biodiversity in the Western Catchment has been significantly altered since European settlement. Whilst the landscape is mostly un-cleared, and native vegetation is largely intact, extensive grazing by domestic and feral herbivores combined with the introduction of artificial watering points has effectively caused dramatic increases in the total grazing pressure (TGP) on the landscape. Droughts, over grazing and rabbit plagues have also contributed to the increase of invasive native scrub, which decreases both productive, and biodiversity values in the landscape. Altered fire regimes also play a significant role in the change of vegetation structure and function. Introduced predators have contributed to the extinction of 15 animals in the catchment. There are currently 132 species listed as threatened under the NSW Threatened Species Conservation Act as well as ten ecological communities in the Catchment. Table 1 presents a list of the endangered ecological communities in the catchment. These communities are considered, amongst others, a high priority in the HCV program.

Table 1: Endangered ecological communities in the Western Catchment

Nelia Shrublands
Acacia melvillei Shrubland in the Riverina and Murray-Darling Depression bioregions
Artesian Springs Ecological Community
Brigalow Community
Brigalow-gidgee Woodland/Shrubland
Carbeen Open Forest Community in the Darling Riverine Plains and Brigalow Belt South Bioregions
Coolibah-Black Box woodland of the northern riverine plains in the Darling Riverine Plains and Brigalow Belt South bioregions
Inland Grey Box Woodland
Myall Woodland in the Darling Riverine Plains; Brigalow Belt
Sandhill Pine Woodland in the Riverina; Murray-Darling Depression and NSW South Western Slopes bioregions

The High Conservation Value incentive program

The HCV incentive program is one of several categories of financial incentives offered to landholders within the Western Catchment, generally on an annual basis. Aimed at encouraging landholders to identify and manage areas of high conservation significance on their properties, this program offers up to 100% of the costs of infrastructure required to establish conservation management activities on a funded site. The program also provides an up-front payment to cover ongoing management costs for the 15-year term of the agreement.

As with all the Western CMA incentive programs landholders are invited through the media and direct mail out to submit an application for funds. District officers are available to provide information and support to landholders to develop their applications. Applications are assessed by an independent panel and further information on each application is provided by district officers as required.

An area of high conservation value is considered to be a site that contains one or more of the following values or attributes and is in moderate to good ecological condition to enable improvement in the site over the life of the program:

- a known threatened species
- a site with known specific habitat of a threatened species
- a sample of an endangered ecological community
- a site of significance to Aboriginal people or a site containing significant evidence of Aboriginal use of or occupation of the site
- a site containing a rare landscape or significant geological feature
- a riparian corridor
- a wetland or billabong or lagoon

This broad array of criteria opens many possibilities for HCV sites across the Catchment; however for the first 3 years of the program only 3 sites were established. Interest was received, from approximately 10 other landholders, however, for various reasons these projects did not proceed. An increased emphasis was placed on the program in 2008 where 12 sites were established, followed by a further 20 in 2009.

Engaging landholders in conservation

The rapid growth in the uptake of the program, from a very slow beginning, is worthy of further discussion. All of the other Western CMA incentive programs have been over-subscribed since the first incentive round in 2005. Given that the HCV program is a pure conservation incentive, it is not surprising that landholders may have been not as interested in participating compared with some of the other more production-oriented programs. During the 2008 and 2009 incentive rounds, there were a few key differences in the delivery of the HCV program than in the previous rounds. The Western CMA employs a Catchment Officer and a Community Support Officer in each of the four district offices (Broken Hill, Cobar, Bourke and Walgett). There are also Aboriginal Community Support Officers in the Broken Hill and Walgett offices. These staff members played a pivotal role in the increase in the uptake of the HCV program. A proportion

of these officers in particular, took a very strong interest in the program and actively promoted it amongst landholders in their districts. They were supported and encouraged to do this by the regionally-based Biodiversity Officer. They were able to provide information to landholders about the opportunities to be involved in the program and take away some of its previous strongly portrayed conservation image. Suddenly there were many potential sites suited to this program and growing interest from landholders. During the 2009 incentive round, landholders who had participated in the 2008 round told their neighbours about the program, as was the case in the Culgoa River area.

The HCV program will continue to be implemented during the next Western CMA incentive round, due to commence in 2011. It is hoped that the interest will continue to grow. Whilst the program has resulted in some important sites being managed for conservation, the task remains to continue to meet the CAP target of adequately protecting ecological communities of high conservation value throughout the catchment. There are some endangered ecological communities that are yet to be included as sites in the program. Finding suitable sites and more importantly landholders who manage these sites and are interested in participating will be a future challenge.

Case studies

Mukudjeroo Waterhole, Naree Station

The Mukudjeroo Waterhole, on Naree Station northwest of Bourke is one of four permanent waterholes of its kind on the Cuttaburra Creek. Property owners, Paul and Debbie Kaluder have utilised funds from the HCV program to erect a 5.6 km fence around the entire perimeter of the waterhole, to exclude livestock grazing and feral herbivores. They also actively control pigs and foxes at the site. The fringing yapunyah and coolabah vegetation community has responded strongly to the fencing since it was completed. Managing this special part of Naree fits in well with the Kaluder's belief in holistic property management.

Lancewood Regeneration, Brindingabba Station

David and Kylie Fisher of Brindingabba Station are custodians of one of two remaining populations of lancewood (*Acacia petrea*) in NSW. Growing in the rugged upper catchment of Clarke's Creek north of the Cuttaburra basin, lancewood regeneration has been prevented by continuous grazing by feral goats. The Fisher's will fence the perimeter of 7900 hectares of lancewood habitat and control feral goats, which has not been possible before. This will remove the continuous cycle of grazing which will allow the lancewood to regenerate. Domestic grazing will continue, on a managed basis after an initial period of rest. It will also have broader benefits to managing total grazing pressure generally in this area. A smaller total grazing exclusion site will also be established to serve as a monitoring area for lancewood regeneration.

Protecting the Little Thigabillas, Compton Downs

South-east of Bourke, lie a series of low, rounded hills which form a significant creation story for the Ngemba people. Vegetated with grey mallee and white cypress pine woodland, the Little Thigabillas will be protected by 12 kilometers of hinge joint fencing and managed for conservation. Thigabilla is the Ngemba word for echidna. The story tells how the hills were formed when a group of baby echidnas grew tired when travelling and stopped to rest. They stayed there while their mother waited for them further away where she became Mt Oxley. The traditional owners and now custodians of the property, the Yatama Nugurra Land Enterprise also plan to place an in-perpetuity conservation agreement on the site.

Connecting the Culgoa

Five properties are involved in projects that will result in an almost continuous 50 km corridor of protected riparian vegetation along both sides of the Culgoa River north-east of Bourke. Fencing the river with hinge joint fencing will prevent domestic livestock and feral goats accessing the river. The endangered ecological community of coolabah black box woodland is represented in this new reserve. Two properties, "Culgoa Downs" and "Innisfail", started the corridor in 2008 while three more, "Mundiwa", "Boneda" and "Part Cartlands" have joined in 2009. Not only will

the riparian zone benefit, but so too will the property owners who will have better control over stock management and improved ability to control grazing on the property generally.

Conclusion

Conservation on privately managed leasehold land in the NSW Western Catchment is gaining traction amongst landholders who are increasingly seeing the benefits not only to property management, but also to the broader environment. The Western CMA is using its High Conservation Value incentive program to engage landholders in conservation management on important sites in Western NSW. Through the efforts of passionate district staff the program will continue to gain momentum ensuring that a representative sample of ecological communities of high conservation value be protected in partnership with landholders.

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