

The way ahead

**FOR THE LANDCARE
FARMING PROGRAM:
DISCUSSION PAPER**



**Landcare
Farming**



Welcome

The Landcare Farming Program (LFP) is a joint partnership between the National Landcare Network and Landcare Australia and funded by the Australian Government to strengthen the connection between Landcare and Australian agriculture.

The LFP strategy, and subsequent projects, will support improved landholder and producer-led involvement in natural resource management for enhanced agriculture, ecosystem and community resilience outcomes. Our goal is to create a national Landcare Farming strategy which supports a single Australian Landcare voice.

LFP will provide landholders and producers with a program to identify with and a vehicle to address natural resource management challenges using the latest research and to promote the positive impact we have on improving soil, water and biodiversity health.

Our aim is to provide an independent community of practise for landholders and producers, one which shares the latest research, resources and decision-support tools directly with them. It will utilise this network of producers to test, review and provide feedback to researchers, thus ensuring the latest RDE&A is ground-truthed and tailored to local conditions. LFP will provide a central, independent and national community of practise of landholders and producers to drive identification and producer adoption of evidence-based best management practices for sustainable natural resource use and building resilient regional communities – with a common set of performance indicators to justify our ongoing stewardship and sustainable landscape management.

To help design the program we sought input from each State and Territory Landcare Peak Organisation (STO) and their representatives, ensuring the opportunities and activities identified within the LFP strategy aligns with the strengths, capacity and local focus or interests of grassroot producers, while ensuring alignment and advancement of Australian agriculture RDE&A and industry sustainability reporting strategies.

This paper examines Landcare's role in building awareness and uptake of best management farming and natural resource management practices to improve capacity and resilience. In doing so, the LFP partnership has been able to mesh grassroot feedback with industry and government sustainability strategies and their reporting needs.

Shane Norrish

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National
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What is the Landcare Farming Program?

Landcare Farming is designed to strengthen the connection between Landcare and Australian agriculture sectors, while building agricultural community resilience. The program promotes awareness and uptake of management practices to improve soil health and water quality and increase biodiversity in agricultural landscapes.

The Landcare Farming Program (LFP) will build resilience for Australian producers and their rural communities through improved participation in environmental stewardship, implementation of innovative land management practices and validating research findings which improve farm productivity – and improves our soil, water and biodiversity.

In 2020 the LFP team sought input for design of the LFP strategy through roundtable workshops with each peak Landcare state and territory organisation (STO). The results are summarised in this document. Key recurring themes highlighted here come directly from the 2020 workshop reports.

“Get Landcare into agricultural and environment policies”

“Critical to engage next generation of landholders”

“Need to address succession in Landcare”

“Landcare talking to landholders with one voice”

“Biodiversity building long term resilience in the landscape”

The five Ps of Landcare Farming



PEOPLE

Communication, capacity building, succession planning, policy leadership opportunities.

To better understand the needs and vision of landholders the LFP has created a project to take a national snapshot from its grassroot agriculture and natural resource management leaders. Simply – the investment in roundtable discussions has helped us better understand how the LFP can best support grassroot organisations achieve their objectives within their community – and better promote Landcare outcomes to shareholders as one story.



PLACE

Demonstrate local action, stewardship, a common language, visible leadership, connectivity.

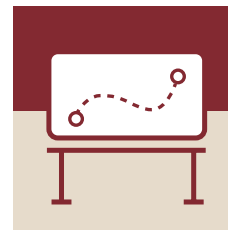
The Landcare Legacy campaign asks Landcare people to share stories to create a mosaic of Landcare producers across the country. We want to promote what these producers are doing, reading, learning, seeing, listening to, and are motivated by. This information will help LFP demonstrate the impact to the Australian agricultural sector. In turn, this will cement our scope and scale and impact of past investments for government, industry and corporate partners. When consolidated with the findings identified in our People and Performance, this evidence will create a national situation awareness map for future investment.



PERFORMANCE

On-farm trials, common metrics, evidence-based ecosystem health and productivity.

The Performance element of the strategy will provide an environmental snapshot. LFP will undertake benchmarking using carbon footprint and natural capital accounting to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for soil, water and biodiversity improvement. A series of 50 benchmarking workshops across the 10 Australia agro-ecological farm zones will engage 500 producers and create a baseline of environmental evidence. These hubs will allow national alignment across multiple themes and activities, and will be used to strengthen Landcare's connection with the agricultural sector.



PROGRAM PLANNING

Flexible, realistic, accountability, peer-to-peer, science based on-farm action.

An outcome of the first three Ps will provide a network of interconnected farmers, landholders and industry stakeholders in a range of landscapes with a common set of project themes and principles, consistent communication, monitoring and evaluation and SWOT indicators. Off the back of these projects, we will work with Landcare groups and STOs to identify evolving industry research and innovation needs to address the SWOTs identified across the five Ps. Groups will be invited to submit proposals to develop projects to address the benchmarking SWOTs.



PARTICIPATION

Peer-to-peer activities, knowledge brokers, co-design, representative, common voice.

The LFP pilot projects are not seeking to duplicate existing STO strategies or programs, but to align our collective works on common themes and offer value to stakeholders and sectors. The benchmarking groups will develop tailored support for peer-to-peer diffusion of results and provide planning direction to the STO and the catchment group. Underpinning this will be case studies, tools and training opportunities, a national online communication and engagement platform and common contract M&E and reporting templates. These will underpin and ground-truth the LFP themes and principles. This will increase industry recognition of the LFP network as a preferred project partner.

Actions and activities to deliver on the LFP Roundtable vision

Landcare is a recognised and long-standing national network, with a strong history of assisting producers, landholders and communities to build skills which help them adapt to changing conditions.

The Landcare network provides an excellent model for delivering learning and building awareness and social capital to approach challenges.

However, roundtable feedback suggests that as competition for project funding intensifies, market and industry acknowledgement of our work continues to contract, farmers face information overload and recognition of our capabilities and ability to attract new or maintain groups in some regions is limited. Subsequently, some Landcare groups and networks are struggling to gain traction and grow their base.

The funding of LFP is an opportunity to demonstrate successful networks and their impact, their local experience and focus, as well as promote a long history of good landholder stewardship. Aggregated, the on-ground impact and actions of these Landcare successes and community impact help provide quantifiable, landscape scale natural resource management outcomes and support a coordinated national investment strategy beyond 2023.

LFP stakeholders have identified six key themes which tie our program objectives and outcomes to improve soil, water and biodiversity health on Australian farms while meeting RDE&A and reporting obligations. The proposed strategy will tie onground activities to these themes and, therefore, industry reporting needs and will assist the newer and less developed regions/groups to develop the skills and opportunities to grow their network and members. Together we can provide input into a common framework to measure this impact, identify new opportunities and reach a larger audience.

The six themes are:

1. Managing vegetation
2. Groundcover
3. Carbon flows
4. Biodiversity
5. Building drought resilience
6. My people (developing landholder awareness and skills).

At the farm level, the LFP have developed a set of Landcare Farming principles, or management principles for an individual, to underpin practices which improve soil, water and biodiversity outcomes, and productivity. This means Landcare actions on-farm are now aligned to industry or government reporting needs. Aligning industry reporting targets to on-farm needs ensures our strengths, capacity and interests of grassroots producers can be actioned and aligned to industry or government reporting commitments, thus ensuring RDE&A is tailored, utilised and tested from the bottom up. This provides LFP with tangible actions and activities with commercial and investment merit.

The projects will build a baseline of evidence for LFP to better understand our landholders and advisors and their needs, their capacities and passions. By gathering a national snapshot of our people, our place and our performance, we can understand past success, the scale of the network, new opportunities and our shared vision for the future (planning). This will allow us to create a common set of messages, projects and a vision which will drive future Landcare planning and participation.



The co-design process

The 5Ps were re-emphasised as critical foundation concepts for future Landcare Farming outcomes. Discussions identified a number of successful examples and groups which could be role models in designing the LFP.

The 2020 engagement and consultation across STOs was designed to generate input to the conceptualisation and scope of the LFP such that it addresses two objectives with five key outcomes.

OBJECTIVE 1

Strengthen the connection between Landcare and Australian agriculture sectors

- Outcome 1** Reliable, valued and easy-to-access and understand producer support, including information, training, demonstrations and networks.
- Outcome 2** Demonstrable strong and valued linkages between Landcare and Australian agriculture sectors.
- Outcome 3** Increased producer connection with the Landcare Farming Program and its principles.

OBJECTIVE 2

Contribute to agricultural community resilience across Australia

- Outcome 4** The LFP is recognised as a strong and innovative program which is valued by producers and the Australian agriculture sector stakeholders.
- Outcome 5** The LFP drives an increase in Landcare group activities and adoption of best management practices for improved soil, water and biodiversity outcomes.

What did we hear at the STO roundtables?

We've summarised the key outputs from the roundtable workshops coordinated with the eight STOs regarding current challenges for Landcare Farming and the vision for where our network of land managers could be in 2025.

A number of common issues were identified as fundamental for the future strength and capacity of Landcare in the agricultural sector.

To bring the vision to life, the actions recommended by workshop participants are summarised, as are the suggested priorities for improving the quality of soil, water and biodiversity on agricultural land.

Consolidating the vision and actions into the core components of the Landcare Farming Program yielded a challenging list – ambitious but achievable.



CHALLENGES

What are the critical issues for Landcare?

Invisibility in state and commonwealth policies: agriculture, environment, regional and community development and (even) natural resource management.

Landcare not seen as equalling innovation.

Landcare often equated with 'meeting culture', or trees, weeds and pests: not what excites landholders.

Connect what ag sector thinks and does; daily research, tech innovation, data tools and environmental goals, to translate from theory to practice.

Building evidence which validates our practices and project outcomes.

Knowledge gaps are opportunities for product sellers.

A wide range of stakeholders: blockies, producers, greenies, laggards, early adopter, broad-acre, rangelands etc.

Succession planning in Landcare and on-farm.

Staffing and volunteer instability and a lack of skills.

Staffing impacts on credibility and trust collaboration.

Boffins rule the roost – extension absent or doesn't work.

Time shortage: applications/implementation/reporting.

Failure to sell our successes effectively.

VISION

Where do we want to be in five years?

Landcare connecting the 5Ps for profitability, resilience and sustainability in landscape, ag, industry and community.

Known and trusted network for landholders and the community.

Collaboration across ag sectors, RDCs, CRCs, peak bodies, NRMS, environmental and conservation groups.

Strong, meaningful data to define Landcare impact and changes.

Profitable ag = sustainable climate resilient ag; biodiversity is linked to profitability in ag mindset.

Landcare practices are defined and visible in agriculture policies, environment, resource management at local, state and Commonwealth levels.

Actively engaged with indigenous groups.

Policy embraces LFP principles, practice and people.

Brand Landcare is known and trusted, synonymous with a positive environmental outcome from ag industry.

Landcare land managers, their farming practices, and stewardship is valued and acclaimed.

Mindset links biodiversity, healthy soil and water results.

Market and government investment rewards good land stewardship.

What are the fundamentals for LFP success?



An action plan

REALISING THE VISION

Landcare Farming: producers leading the renaissance of regional Australia with best management agricultural practices and community action.



ACTIONS

Landcare building the 5Ps for profitability, resilience and sustainability

Build the LFP strategy on **innovation, profitability and ambition** for resilient landscape outcomes.

Build **baseline indicators** of our Landcare Farming network using known and established spatial data and tools to showcase our performance.

Establish a common set of monitoring and evaluation **benchmarks** for projects to help create a national picture of Landcare Farming.

Evidence led with early attention to **MERI** (monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement) using existing tools for proof.

Recognition and celebration of local **variability** and producer adaptability and innovation.

Recruit public **champions** respected by landholders, industry and community to build brand Landcare.

Program **leadership structure** is lean, accessible and representative of landholders – small, effective and accountable.

Peer-to-peer learning between landholders, and across industry sectors, to build a community of innovative industry and community Landcare Farming leaders and create our knowledge bank.

Landcare Farming **roles are secure** and sought after career opportunities which attract young, knowledgeable and passionate professionals into our communities.

On-farm trials inform whole Landcare community of interest and provide evidence, communicate information demonstrate practice change, inform case studies, build the brand and build the brand and engage the disengaged.

Build a national **LFP portal**: available to the public and holding data, tools, research bank, case studies and an index of experts.

ON-GROUND PRIORITIES

Australian agriculture sector and the communities it supports depend on a biodiverse and well managed natural resource base.

Landcare Farming producers play a major role in protecting and conserving Australia's soil, water and biodiversity by ensuring their on-farm management practices are best practice and natural resource use is sustainable.

The on-going ecosystem function priorities identified are: soil, water and biodiversity.

SOIL

Identify and work with landholders on pain points for improved production and environmental outcomes.

Focus on all elements of soil improvement, including elements of soil improvement: erosion/loss, exhaustion, soil disease, chemistry, biology, carbon organic matter and soil carbon.

Intervention and investment in soil health must work from identified and measured baselines to build knowledge AND practical application (capacity) through realistic goals for improvement.

Provide simple, clear messaging which directly links productivity improvement and long term environmental gains for all levels of understanding.

Case studies and field trials crucial for learning, spreading knowledge and demonstrating how-tos.

Soil health and related ecosystem services are recognised, understood and measured and valued by all land managers.

Coordination of soil health activities at a local level for improved awareness and adoption of past and present investments.

WATER

Plan and measure water best management practices at farm scale for aggregation to build state and national understanding.

Develop on-farm water budgets which detail the balance of water for production and environment – address licences, allocation, access, planning.

Identify and test appropriate water technology: solar bores, tanks, dams, weirs, turkey nests.

Interventions based on systems analysis: control water → control production → control landscape.

Demonstrate different approaches across the range of Australian landscapes.

Peer-to-peer learning vital; demonstration days and on-farm visits to socialise learning.

BIODIVERSITY

Move from control of pests and weeds to habitat building for profit and resilience; role of plants in biodiversity and soil and water health.

Builds on evidence about what is in place – 20-year plan.

Informed choices about what to farm where/where not to farm.

Build regional seed banks – right plants for stage of rehabilitation – trials and demonstration sites for learning.

Relate measurement and metrics to stewardship payments.

Biodiversity and fire – build the evidence, knowledge and capacity – opportunity for reconciliation in action.

Time frames – reality check expectations: government and community to be educated to 20-year time frame.



What could the next decade of Landcare Farming Program provide to Australian agriculture?



How do we get there?



Program design bottom up: starts with those doing the work and builds in enablers

Glossary

Adoption: where a landholder changes their management practices resulting in improved outcomes.

Baseline assessment: a snapshot or measurement to determine a starting level/ condition for that particular project area.

Benchmarking: farm benchmarking involves understand your position, performance or profitability over time and how that compares to other like-businesses. This can be done at a whole farm level or an individual enterprise level and can help to identify gaps and opportunities in your operation.

Capacity building: developing the personal skills required to ensure community wellbeing, environmental protection and sustainable natural resource use for long term economic and social success.

Carbon: a naturally abundant, non-metallic element which occurs in all organic compounds and can be found in all known forms of life.

Carbon footprint: the total volume of emissions produced by an organisation, individual or business arising from energy use, transport and animals is commonly referred to as their carbon footprint.

Drivers: any natural or human induced impact which directly or indirectly induces a change, for example, in areas such as political ideology, climate, trade and policy, biosecurity issues and land use issues.

Environmental-economic accounting: a tool which helps us to understand the condition of the environment and its relationship with the economy. By bringing together environmental and economic information it is possible to observe and quantify the contribution the natural environment makes to our economy

Ecosystem services: describes the benefits or services people obtain from the natural environment, including direct products (e.g. water or crops), processes which regulate environmental conditions (e.g. floods, climate), as well as recreational, aesthetic and spiritual benefits.

Natural capital: the stocks of natural assets (which include geology, soil, air, water and all living things and their interactions).

Soil health: is the capacity of soil to function as a living system.



