



Submission to the Agricultural Competitiveness Issues White Paper. (4 pages)

Warrnambool 6 March 2014.

We are a not-for-profit community organisation based in the town of Koroit in South West Victoria.

Our Landcare Network covers the area of Moyne Shire and Warrnambool City Local Government Areas. This is 4% of the land area of Victoria. 70% of this land is privately owned and in agriculture.

In our Basalt to Bay Landcare Network Strategic Plan 2009 – 2015 our vision and mission for our region is as follows:

Vision: The sustaining of biodiverse ecosystems from the Basalt Plains to the Ocean in South West Victoria.

Mission: The Basalt to Bay Landcare Network partners with the Moyne and Warrnambool communities to conserve, restore and connect ecologically sustainable and economically viable natural environments.

In our work with landholders in the region since 2009 we have gained a good understanding of the local community and their attitudes to Landcare. We have learnt what their priorities are and what they are willing to do to be part of a Landcare program. What they want is seed funding to put in native shelter belts where currently there are none. This activity is the main ask of Landcare in this region and it aligns well with Sustainable Agriculture and the Federal “*A Plan for a Cleaner Environment*”.

From our connections to agricultural businesses we built a bid to the Federal Biodiversity Fund Round 2 called “The Moyne Resilient Farms Program” – which covered the planting of over 1 million new native species in connected farm shelter belts across 15 properties in the project area. On just 5 of those properties an additional 1,900,000 square meters of native plant shade and shelter was planned.

Sadly funding for this program was not supported. While it was extremely disappointing that we had the landholders, a great project capacity and a \$3 private to \$1 funding ratio across the whole program, not gaining seed funding was a green light. The light turned on to how we would attract seed funding for these kinds of projects because the demand and the need are amply evident – and not just on the fifteen farms who were involved in the Biodiversity Fund Application.

Clearly investment for Sustainable Agriculture with Native Shelter Belts would have to be brokered from industries reliant on agricultural suppliers – in our region meat, wool, and dairy. As a result we have produced a report “*The Economic Benefits of Native Shelter Belts*” (available at www.basalttobay.org.au) in partnership with those industries. It is an e-report which provides succinct details of what the economic benefits are in planting native shelter belts, so that industry and land managers can make more informed business decisions about investment in them. Every statement of fact is backed by a reference and a e-link to the document they were obtained from. Where the report partners have the research and case studies on their own websites, these are linked to as well. The report is updated every 6 months.

We now have the proven research evidence that our region requires an investment in native shelter belt programs to deliver the large scale shade and shelter for agricultural sustainability and productivity. The consequences of no investment in large scale connected native shelter belting projects can be seen even more dramatically as the old cypress belts begin to die from Cypress Canker – we have large parts of the region where export production is hampered by heat and cold, and where the remaining shelter is being rapidly lost.

The previous investments in native vegetation by government have been targeted along waterways. While this has changed the look of many of the key rivers in our area (Hopkins, Moyne, Merri, Eumarella, Shaw) waterway health remains low and connections between native vegetation on waterways across catchments is sporadic. We need to do more and funding needs to be flexible to align with what the private agricultural land holders are willing to undertake year by year. They are the major landholder – not the Crown. They are also the main owner of native remnants in our network region – surrounding and separating the coastal reserves, Mt Eccles, Tower Hill, Mortlake Common, Cobra Killuc, and Crown River Frontage licences.

In considering how Landcare can assist agriculture in South West Victoria to become more competitive we believe the promotion and seed funding of native shelter belt programs can deliver the following advantages to agricultural competitiveness.

1. Resilience to changing climate – heat, cold, fire, drought, flood.
2. Increased production from the reduction of impacts as at (1) giving greater control to land managers and reducing the reliance on external inputs such as imported fodder.
3. Biosecurity resilience from having fenced vegetation barriers between paddocks and properties – reducing the transmission of Johnnes Disease, lice, ticks, and other livestock pathogen and weeds.
4. Future biosecurity resilience should diseases such as Foot and Mouth, Equine Influenza, and Rabies reach Australia. Double fenced vegetation barriers are a tool already used for AQUIS farms in this area for that reason.
5. Increased connectivity for native biodiversity between remnants and reserves, which in this region are isolated and island-like.
6. Increased services to agriculture provided by native biodiversity present in remnants and reserves (pest control especially).
7. Increased export supply security for industry reliant on farm production during cold and hot weather – wool, milk, meat all reduce supply at these times, shelter belts are proven to assist in the levelling of seasonal impacts.

8. Increased visible change in the agricultural landscape to reflect a greater “greening” of farm land – which in turn is more attractive to internal and external markets as evidence of changed land management practices on a regional scale.
9. Greater opportunity for individual producers to obtain a greater quality of lifestyle by reducing costs and increasing farm and livestock health.
10. Landcare is a brand backed by community led initiatives with an established history and network of successes. We are well placed to initiate and drive the investment by our partners in larger scale agricultural resilience – which in turn quickly leads to greater agricultural competitiveness in a manner that is innately popular with markets and the community.
11. Provide local jobs in rural centric occupations such as nurseries, fencing, and farm labour. This increases the rural work force and retains skilled people to fill regional jobs instead of needing to import labour from other countries as is common now.

We need also to report on the barriers to the success of Landcare in driving Sustainable Agriculture with native shelter belt programs:

1. Lack of secure investment in landscape scale, agricultural shelter belt programs over several years – from government and from industry.
2. Lack of employment security for current Landcare staff employed under the State Local Landcare Facilitator Initiative Funding Scheme (Positions funded to June 2015). It takes time and considerable investment in meeting with individual farmers to build funding bids. This is time currently only resourced from Landcare – because native shelter belt programs are not a priority for others at this time. If they were then we would not be making these submissions or pushing The Economic Benefits of Native Shelter belts Report as the game changer for agriculture in our region.
3. Lack of Federal and State level agreement that sustainable agriculture is irreversibly linked with agricultural competitiveness so that what benefits sustainable Ag is automatically connected with competitiveness – locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.
4. Ignorance of what drives agriculture to change. For some reason we have encountered a belief within the community and government that providing funding for regional energy efficient lighting programs is the way in which Australia will become more sustainable and “green”. When we see daily evidence of the need to change land use practices on that 70% of 4% of the State, such investments seem urban/domestic- centric and disassociated with landholders investing in sustainable agriculture on the majority land use.
If Australia is to become more competitive in agriculture, investment needs to be directed where the benefit hits best and where farmers are involved in the actions. Giving landholders rebate funding to plant native shelter belts across private land to increase their production and farm health is a worthwhile and sustainable investment to make in regional Australia.

What is the proposed role of the Basalt to Bay Landcare Network to deliver this?

1. To *assist to broker the funding* for the on-ground actions of a shelter belt investment program in the region by either partnering with other organisations and agencies to deliver the actions or by facilitating the actions to occur within industry clusters.
2. *Promote sustainable environments* as the wider goal of all; to promote healthy ecosystems; to promote the use of native shelter belts as a mainstream activity; and to promote agriculture as environmental land managers - positively.
3. To *engage with the broader community* on the benefits of sustainable agriculture using native shelter belts and record the results locally.

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