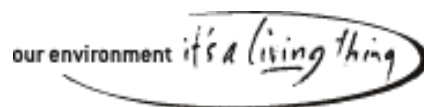


Write it up!

Sustainability education case study

The Environmental Champions Program: engaging an agricultural industry



The Environmental Champions Program: engaging an agricultural industry

Snapshot

Aims

There is increasing pressure on agriculture to demonstrate good environmental management. As a user of Australia's valuable water resources, the rice industry is under scrutiny. Australian rice growers aim to pass a healthy farm and region onto future generations. However an increasing volume of legislation and other information is making this goal an overwhelming task.

Designed and implemented by rice growers, the Environmental Champions Program (ECP) works with the whole community to:

- achieve more sustainable farm practices
- simplify complex legislation and other information
- improve public perception of the rice industry.

Location

The ECP is based in Leeton (NSW), but the program spans the entire rice growing area of Australia—mainly in south-western NSW and northern Victoria (see Figure 1 below).

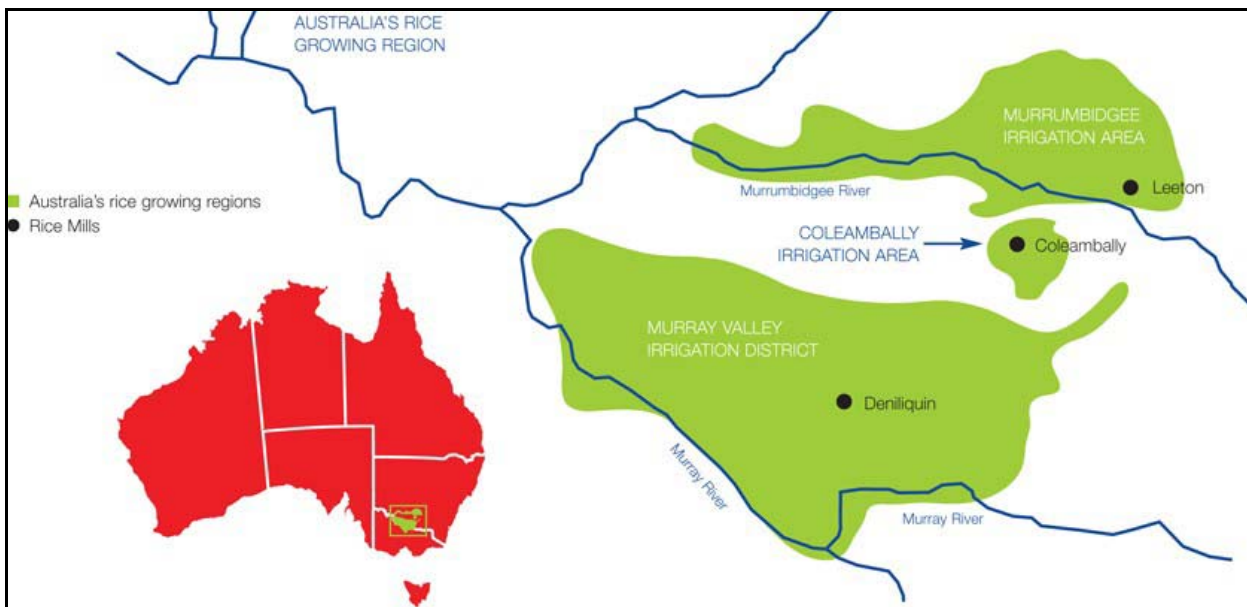


Figure 1: Location of the Environmental Champions Program

Who is involved?

The Ricegrowers Association of Australia (RGA) works with over 30 partners to manage and oversee the program: farmers, irrigation companies, Landcare, CSIRO Land and

Water, University of Canberra, SunRice, Environmental Australia, other governmental agencies, rice systems research groups, catchment management authorities, non government organisations and local green groups.

Farmers from across the rice growing region are participating in the program. They include not only rice growers but also other farmers in the region.

Good practice education

- increased the capacity of farmers through peer support, streamlined information and clear industry benchmarks
- combined community action on local environmental issues e.g. linking remnant vegetation
- produced healthier landscapes through groups of farmers working together on projects
- improved communication between landholders and natural resource management bodies
- provided environmental performance data on rice industry

Funding

The program was originally resourced through a grower levy and significant in-kind support through the dedicated time of rice growers and partner organizations. In 2003 the program received funds from the Natural Heritage Trust through the Federal Government's, 'National Environmental Systems (EMS) Program' (pilot) to trial the ECP and 'Pathways to Industry Program' .

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Acknowledgements

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Rob Kelly	Project Manager, Murrumbidgee Irrigation
Gary and Margaret, Rob, Rob, Russell, June, Jim.	Cluster group of rice growers
Katie Ross	AAEE case study facilitator
Phil Smith	AAEE case study facilitator

A Story from a NSW AAEE case study facilitator

We'd been invited to meet with Gary, a local rice grower, and the other farmers in his cluster group. (A 'cluster' is a self-organising group of 5–10 farmers.)

We wanted to find out what the farmers had learned through participating in the program. The morning's two-hour talk was filled with laughter, fresh coffee, tea and scones—and truly inspiring conversation. Everyone contributed and talked about what changes they had made on their farms as a result of the program and how they themselves had changed.

Rob, one of the farmers, explained that he was trying some direct seeding in a 20 hectare block that wasn't suitable for high input agriculture. He had planted a variety of native plants and shrubs with seeds that had been provided by Murrumbidgee Irrigation, a key ECP partner.

"That is something that I never would have worked out had I not been involved in this group", he said. "We get the confidence to do things that we wouldn't have done before."

Communication and informal learning are two strong aspects of the Program.

Background

In 2000, led by Les Gordon and others on The Ricegrowers Association of Australia's (RGA) Environmental Working Group, the rice growers had a good hard look at their environmental performance. They weren't satisfied with what they found. The RGA (and associated organisations such as irrigation companies) had several environmental programs in place, but these were ad hoc and uncoordinated. The group decided to bring in a consultant to help get strategic—but the first environmental consultancy company kept trying to push the group in a direction they weren't happy with.

Finding sustainability solutions is not about being told what to do, but rather finding consultants who will help people realise their own ideas.

They waited until they found the right consultant, Dr. Dedee Woodside, who guided a 'learning by doing' process for them. 'If we had hired a consultant who had gone out and written an environmental study for us, we would have released it with a big fanfare, put it on the shelf and that would have been the end of it. Dedee didn't do that. She made us write it ...', said Les.

Drivers

Intensive processes can be time-consuming and energy-sapping, if the right drivers or incentives are not present. The key driver here was 'legacy': leaving healthy landscapes and farms to pass onto future generations. The group therefore developed an environmental policy that addressed a whole range of issues: healthy landscapes and biodiversity, vegetation, rivers and greenhouse gases.

Recognition

Farmers are forced to face perception issues. They are often labeled as environmental vandals, despite significant improvements in farming practices over the years (RGA 2006). 'It is pretty disheartening to spend ten to twenty thousand dollars on fencing for a large area of native vegetation ... only to pick up the paper three days later and read you are one of the worst environmental vandals in the world,' Les said.

The program had to set targets for people - and when they achieved those targets, the program had to recognise their achievements. This recognition had two benefits:

- useful statistics and data
- positive reward for growers

Assessment tools in each learning level provide useful statistics on how many farmers have made specific improvements. These statistics help farmers show that they are doing the right thing. Another way is visual - 'star posters' on farm gates signify that these farmers are part of the Environmental Champions Program. Each star represents the level achieved to protect and enhance the environment.

Good practice in sustainability education

The ECP promotes good practice in sustainability education through its structure and content.

Structure

Sustainability education promotes social change through the initiatives of individuals and organisations.

The program includes the program manager, regional coordinators, the RGA Environmental Working Group and voluntary cluster groups of rice growers. The Working Group helps oversee the program in conjunction with the RGA staff.

The cluster groups are one of the main components of the ECP. These self-organising groups meet on a regular basis to collaborate, solve problems, learn—and create on-the ground improvements. The cluster group structure encourages a high degree of participation among the farmers involved.

Farmer to farmer learning

Farmer to farmer learning encourages networking and learning outside the program. It also helps farmers realise that they have a lot of important knowledge about their own practices.

'As a farmer,' Jim commented, 'you have to work out new ways of doing things: financial planner, chemical specialist, engineer, and agronomist. That's why this cluster group works so well; growers are able to learn from one another about a wide variety of necessary skills. There is always someone who is going to disagree, but disagreement is important because it stimulates discussion and we try to learn from everyone's perspective'.

Sustainability education encourages participatory decision-making: learners participate in decisions on how they are to learn.

Voluntary groups

The voluntary cluster groups work well because they allow trust to build within the group. They are small enough for everyone to get to know each other and contribute. The projects are grass roots driven: rice growers needed to be part of the solution, not just the problem.

Currently, 25% of the rice growers are involved with the program, which is a high figure for a voluntary program. Regional coordinators help get more people interested in the ECP by speaking at meetings of relevant groups and through radio ads and newspaper articles.

At the introductory meeting, potential group members are given a chance to ask questions and decide if they will work well together. Each cluster group begins at their own pace, come up with their own ideas, join forces, and set group targets. Groups meet wherever the group decides, ranging from offices to shearing sheds.

Education for sustainability is a lifelong learning process that provides learning opportunities for all sectors of society.

Unplanned benefits

The informal cluster group structure creates an enjoyable atmosphere, and has had many unplanned social and personal benefits: good mental health, camaraderie, support and growing communication and trust among neighbors. 'Historically, farmers have been private about what innovations they have done, but in this group now there is trust and understanding, a willingness to share innovation and ideas', said Rob.

Cooperation

The Environmental Champion Program had a high degree of cooperation in its development. Plans, data and resources are shared. Every element of the program (including the mechanism for delivery, content, and recognition of environmental achievements) has the collective approval of all partners, RGA staff and most importantly growers (RGA 2006).

According to Murrumbidgee Irrigation, 'We're not going to do on-farm, because the Champions program does it. They are not going to regional because we do it. But we will give each other the data, to get a whole of scale from microcosm all the way up to regional scale. It's really good use of government funding and a really good use of irrigator funds because it is more bang for the buck', said Rob Kelly.

The ECP manager and officers are able to provide a larger voice for the rice growers. This encourages other partners to come on board and help the growers. 'Before, if outsiders came up, we [the farmers] were more concerned about self-survival, we were more suspicious, but now as a group we can take their help' (Gary).

Partnerships

The program includes regional programs with up to 60% of the content being administered by relevant regional authorities. The RGA has outsourced other organisations that are now providing additional resources, such as funding, seeds, plants, fencing and incentives.

The RGA acts as a 'broker' to help the growers help themselves: 'We listen, we give them suggestions, and they provide us with all of the information. We never approach it as the experts; we approach it as a partnership. We won't tell them what or how, we walk in there as equals', said Janelle.

Sustainability education builds a 'learning society' through critical and reflective engagement; it seeks to enable the development of new understandings of the environment and of our place within it.

Content

The ECP is a change management and capacity building tool. It helps landholders think and learn about every aspect of farm management: water use issues, air quality, chemical application and management, for example.

The content is practical, relevant and linked to existing requirements. It integrates environmental and productivity objectives, creates ownership and builds capacity.

Management pathways

A partnership committee collectively agreed upon the program content and pedagogy. It focuses on ten 'management pathways':

1. chemical management
2. water use and net recharge
3. water quality and management
4. farm planning and management
5. reducing environmental risk
6. native vegetation and biodiversity
7. air and atmosphere quality
8. product quality and eco-efficiencies
9. soil health
10. trade-offs and trade in environmental services

The content delivers all parts of the RGA environmental policy: biodiversity, greenhouse, and industry improvement.

Sustainability education acknowledges the complex connections between diverse aspects of environmental problems.

Learning levels

Each content area or management pathway is organised into five levels. These levels help make learning relevant and reduce the feeling of being overwhelmed by information. They break the content down into achievable steps, each leading to increasingly bigger challenges.

The program begins in a positive way: Level One uses self-assessment criteria which help participants identify gaps and, significantly, recognises what they have already achieved. The levels also provide personal motivation, encouragement—and

competition between people and clusters: many participants wanted to progress further through the program once they completed Level One.

Self-assessment tools are provided at the start of each level. The growers review their farm business performance against industry agreed benchmarks.

Level		Aims
1	Basic industry standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remove fears and perceptions • Build trust with all partners and in cluster group • Achieve base level of meeting regulation, policy, and education standards
2	Planning for beyond industry standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop strategies and action plans that enable environmental and productivity improvement • Provide farmers with skills to look critically at their farm systems and prioritise their actions
3	Put plans into action and enhance biodiversity on the farm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement level 2 action plans • Include options in the Biodiversity and Greenhouse Strategies for rice growing
4	Trade, innovation, and eco-efficiencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for economic return: carbon, biodiversity, and salinity credits, or waste • Engage over the long-term to achieve environmental, economic, and social outcomes
5	Regional efforts towards catchment sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage growers to work in partnerships to address regional and catchment outcomes • Change in land use, engaging in green trade-offs, within or beyond the region.

Education for sustainability is a lifelong learning process that provides environmental learning opportunities for all sectors of society.

Simplified information

Many landholders are concerned about the increasing amount of complex legislation and the number of environmental problems they must face. The RGA simplifies the information and translates it into what can be achieved on the farm.

A good example is the chemical shed [a requirement for Level One]. ‘There were 3 or 4 different documents from different organisations—each at 100 pages each—and none of them really gave a clear description. We turned that into a 16-page booklet and a one-page checklist. Then we can give the contact details if they want to get that extra bit of info, if it is needed,’ said Janelle.

Flexibility

The content is continually developed, improved upon or tailored to the growers' needs. All materials developed for each level are adapted to each irrigation body's license agreement, for example. The learning structure is about 'making our program fit with their priorities, not making our priorities fit with their program,' said Louise.

Education for sustainability is a lifelong learning process that provides environmental learning opportunities. It needs to engage people of all ages and backgrounds.

Capacity building

Rob Kelly says it is important to ask: 'Are we putting something in place that will provide a legacy ... and ensure this is a self-seeding program?'

'A lot of programs fail because five years after the funding is gone, the farmer hasn't built his capacity to the point where it has become part of his day to day routine. And he goes back to his old ways ...'.

Integrating environmental and productivity objectives

The greenhouse gas program that is currently being developed revolves around cost-savings rather than just reducing greenhouse gas emissions. This is because there is a limited market for carbon trading right now, so the program is focusing on what really means something to the grower.

Sustainability requires broader thinking and deeper understanding of practices in the bigger environmental, social and economic context; the ECP delivers on that need.

Strategic questioning and critical thinking

Much of the program involves critical thinking and assessment activities, which challenged traditional methods and assumptions.

Participants are given many tools to help them understand their environmental issues, research possible solutions and try different ways of doing things. The greenhouse gas scorecard was an eye opener: it showed that methane, rather than fuel and fertilizer, had the dominant impact on their greenhouse gas footprint.

Critical thinking and problem solving lead to confidence in addressing the dilemmas and challenges of sustainable development.

SWOT analysis

Landholders are encouraged to think about their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT). During Level Two the cluster groups and program manager have

the chance to talk about local issues and 'look outside the box'. They conduct a SWOT analysis of a typical farm, and then encourage everyone to do it on their own.

Sustainability education is integrated with other environmental management tools.

Lessons

Don't reinvent the wheel Before you start a project, see if it has been done already in your area. 'Nothing infuriates landholders more than having to tell program coordinators, "That's already been done. What are you doing it again for? You are wasting our money" ', said Rob Kelly

Collaborate Treat a partnership as you would other relationships. Make them mutually beneficial.

Be proactive Be proactive and strategic. Don't just identify problems: present solutions.

Plan Be prepared for what you want to do—have a structure or framework in place to take advantage of government funding, for example.

Collect quality data Collecting quality data is one of the greatest ways to influence policy and decision makers.

Final words

The Environmental Champions Program is an inspiring example of how to acknowledge a problem, look at possible resolutions, and collaboratively create and implement an effective solution. The voluntary step-by-step education program helped build capacity and create change among the rice growers to improve both their productivity and their environmental footprint.

In short, the program provides the opportunity for farmers to 'do the right thing'. 'I always maintain that farmers are fundamentally good people. And if you give them the opportunity, particularly skills but also economic opportunity and time, to do the right thing, they will do the right thing. And that is what the Champions Program is all about,' said Les.

The development and delivery of sustainability education is aimed at assisting the community to move towards sustainability.

Reference

RGA (2006) *Environmental Champions Program: working together in partnership to achieve meaningful change. National EMS Pilot Program*. Final report. Ricegrowers' Association of Australia Inc: Leeton, NSW.