

Environmental Champions Program



ANNUAL REPORT

2008



July 2008

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Foreword

The 07/08 year continued to throw challenges at the rice industry, including the Environmental Champions Program, the most obvious being the ongoing drought. We do however remain committed to working toward our goal of a healthy legacy for the future.

The drought has impacted on farmers both financially and emotionally. For those which are involved in the ECP and continued to be active the program has provided a valuable outlet for social interaction, support and the chance to think ahead beyond the current situation.

The social values of the program's cluster group structure have been evident from the beginning and are now proving invaluable. Participants greatly value the network which the ECP provides and continue to want to meet despite the increasing pressure of drought.

The RGA is also impacted by the drought and our staff numbers have been reduced over the past year, including in the environment team.

We have had to carefully prioritise our activities to ensure that the ECP is able to continue supporting our farmers. This means doing our core business well and unfortunately not forging ahead with some of the extra activities which under better circumstances we would embrace.

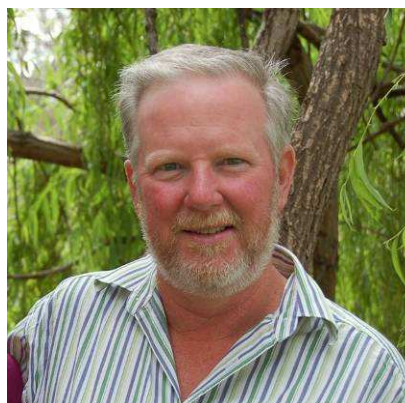
Despite these challenges the ECP continues to move forward both through the enthusiasm of participants and staff.

Some highlights from the year include;

- Several groups initiating activities to increase their knowledge on local natural resource management issues including wetlands and vegetation

- Development of five case studies, summarised in this report, which showcase some of the groups and individuals involved in the ECP
- Research projects with CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems to improve our understanding of climate change adaptation for farm businesses and our regional biodiversity
- The ongoing and new partnerships with a range of organisations which make the ECP possible

The Rice Industry remains committed to addressing our environmental footprint in a strategic and integrated fashion and demonstrating this through the Environmental Champions Program.



***Les Gordon
President
Ricegrowers' Association of
Australia Inc.***

Background

The Environmental Champions Program (ECP) is an initiative of the Ricegrowers' Association of Australia Inc (RGA). The ECP is the delivery mechanism for the industry's environmental policy, developed in 2001 and biodiversity and greenhouse flagship programs.

The program was developed and is managed by members of the RGA and RGA staff with the involvement of many partner organisations. The ECP provides a strategic pathway to meeting the industry's priority for the sustainable management of natural resources.

The ECP is primarily run through local "cluster groups" which are groups of 5-10 farmers who work together on the program with support from a Regional Coordinator.

The structure and delivery of the program has been designed to maximise the opportunity for farmers to get involved through the stepped progression of the levels and the cluster groups.

The ECP is based around nine key management pathways, which address all aspects of the farming business (summarised to the right).

The pathways are delivered via five levels of achievement which each have a number of benchmarks that must be met to gain recognition. The recognition process provides a formal "pat on the back" for growers' achievements.

The ECP also plays a key role in engaging partner organisations. This is vital to ensure the program is covering all key areas of the farm business and working with other programs across the region.

The program incorporates rice industry initiatives and other regional programs such as the land and water management plans delivered by each of the three irrigation companies (Murray, Coleambally & Murrumbidgee) which operate in the rice growing region.

The ECP recognises farmers for participating and undertaking on-ground work through those programs which are delivered by partner organisations.

ECP Structure

Management Pathways

Water
Soil Health
Biodiversity
Chemical Management
Air Quality
Farm Planning
Product Quality
Environmental Risk
Environmental Services

Level 1	Basic Industry Standards
Level 2	Planning and Looking for opportunities
Level 3	Implementing actions
Level 4	Innovation and Eco-efficiencies
Level 5	Regional Efforts toward Catchment Sustainability

More details on the content and structure of the program is available from the ECP website.

www.environmentalchampions.rga.org.au

Role of the Annual Report

The ECP annual report is produced voluntarily by the RGA. It provides information on the progress, outcomes and achievements of the ECP to RGA executive and members, the ECP's partner organisations and the wider community for the previous financial year.

Management of the ECP

Environmental Working Group

The ECP is primarily driven by a group of dedicated rice farmers which sit on the RGA's Environmental Working Group (EWG). This committee is responsible for guiding the strategic direction of the program and ensuring it is meeting the industry's needs.

The members of the EWG in 2007/08 were:

Central Executive Elected

Martin van der Sluys (Chair)
Les Gordon
Alan Walsh
Scott Hogan
Nick Ellwood

Additional members

Leigh Vial
David Marsden
Louise Burge
Helen Dalton

Staff

RGA's Environment team are responsible for the strategic development, on-ground delivery and day to day operations of the ECP.

Over the past year the team has been reduced to three members, with the environmental project officer position being left vacant, due to the impact of drought on the rice industry.

Manager - Environmental Programs
Janelle McGufficke

Regional Coordinator
Murray
Sandy Hopkins

Regional Coordinator
Coleambally/Murrumbidgee
Bernard Star (July 07 to March 08)

Resources

Financial

Over the past year the ECP has been supported by a mix of industry funds through the Rice for Life Levy and Federal Government Funding.

The ECP also received considerable in-kind support from farmers and partner organisations.

External Funding 07/08

\$198,600 EMS Pathways to Sustainable Agriculture Program (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry)

This brings the external financial support received by the industry for its environmental programs to a total of \$2.5million since 2000

In-kind support

It is estimated that the ECP has received approximately \$140,000 of in-kind support, not including time spent outside meetings and workshops.

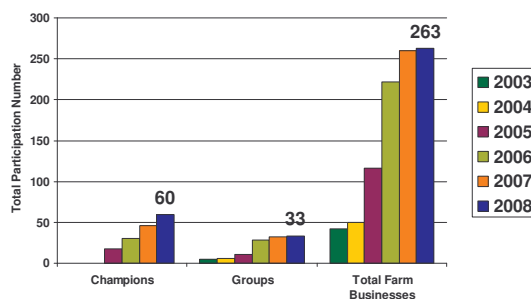
Engagement

A key focus of the ECP is engaging a large number of growers as the first step in achieving change and recognising farmers for their achievements.

Farmer engagement

The ongoing drought has had a marked impact on the morale of farmers in the rice growing region over the past year. This has been reflected through the ECP with only one new group joining the program and reduced activity in existing groups.

There is however still strong interest in the program from those not involved and the ECP Regional Coordinators continue to provide support to existing and potential participants.



Total farm business participation to June 2008

Participation increased slightly through the year with one new group forming in the Murrumbidgee area. Approximately 25% of the industry is engaged in the program.

With such severe drought conditions and the associated financial and emotional stress resulting the ECP has focussed on the social aspects of the program and encouraged groups to continue meeting. A “no pressure” stance has been maintained as it is essential that groups meet because

they wish to and don’t feel pressured to be active or make significant achievements when under such pressure.

In spite of these conditions many groups have remained active and continued to reap the benefits of interaction and group motivation as detailed later in the report.

Partner organisations

The ECP continues to focus on building strong partnerships with a range of organisations. These partnerships enable effective use of resources, streamlining of information to farmers.

The ECP undertook meetings with Murray and Murrumbidgee Catchment Management Authorities, Murrumbidgee, Murray and Coleambally Irrigation companies to increase links between the activities of the ECP and these important natural resource organisations.

New and renewed partnerships

Southern Oil Refineries

A new partnership has been established with Southern Oil Refineries (SOR), based in Wagga Wagga. SOR collect waste oil from the ECP’s 9 waste oil collection facilities and on farm. The waste oil is re-refined by SOR and sold as EnviroOil.



The first load of waste oil being collected from the Gogeldrie waste oil facility July 2007

Environmental Champions Case Studies

Five case studies have been developed to showcase some of the activities groups and individuals have undertaken as part of the program and the benefits which they are gaining through being involved. A short snapshot of each is given here.

DVD and brochure versions are available from RGA, or on the ECP website.

The Yamma Yippers



The ECP is more than an information sharing forum, it's also about social interaction and supporting your neighbours.

The Yamma Yippers Cluster Group is a great example of a group that's tackled the ECP activities with enthusiasm and dedication while also incorporating a strong social component.

Water management is a high priority for the group and the ECP, in conjunction with Coleambally Irrigation's Land and Water Management Plan initiatives, has helped the individual Yamma Yippers farmers make real on-farm improvements in water efficiencies.

It's not unusual to see the Yamma Yippers (pictured above) discuss these and other important environmental challenges for their region over a barbeque and a few drinks. The group members say the support network has been a positive influence for all involved being both enjoyable and motivating.

The Daltons, Yenda

Farmers Nayce and Helen Dalton (pictured below) believe the ECP initiative not only acknowledges sustainability achievements but also creates a local 'think tank' to take environmental leadership to new levels.

The couple formed the Yenda Cluster Group in 2004 as they wanted to be recognised for the environmental stewardship that they'd already completed on farm, as well as have more to do with their neighbours.



The Daltons say in addition to recognising on farm successes, the ECP format assists farmers to identify and implement more improvements. The couple points to the EPA-compliant chemical shed design as a good example of an on-farm result that's been achieved through the ECP process.

Ian Payne, Coleambally

In today's changing environment, traditional farming methods are being replaced with activities that address environmental concerns. The challenge for farmers is ensuring that these new practices not only incorporate a responsible environmental approach, but also increase on-farm productivity resulting in strong economic returns.

Environmental Champions Case Studies



Coleambally farmer, Ian Payne (pictured above), is an ECP participant with the interest and drive to look beyond the established farming methods and investigate the integration of emerging technology into day to day activities. Recently, Ian developed his own on-farm facility where he converts cooking oil into biodiesel to power two of his vehicles.

The Caldwell Cluster Group

The ECP isn't just for rice growers and that's never been more evident than in the rural community of Caldwell.



The farming families who make up the Caldwell Cluster Group (pictured above) couldn't be more diverse - between them they farm livestock, winter cropping, wine grapes and rice. The group meets regularly to share information, support one another and develop a bright vision for the future of their land.

For the Caldwell Cluster Group, swapping ideas and seeing real examples of on-farm and environmental benefits up close keeps each farmer motivated. As a result they have begun to develop a number of coordinated strategies and the Caldwell group members insist that this is just the beginning.

Paul Martin, Barham



The benefits and results of the ECP are enhanced when cluster groups have a strong leader to drive the program at the local level. Murray farmer Paul Martin (pictured above) has been the leader for the Noorong Doers' Cluster Group since its formation in April 2005 and has found the experience to be both challenging and personally rewarding.

Paul volunteered to lead the group in order to expand on his skills, knowledge and experience and as part of his role, took part in the Environmental Champions Development and Leadership Program. Paul believes the rice industry has the opportunity to gain a valuable marketing advantage by highlighting its environmental strategies in biodiversity, chemical management and water efficiencies.

CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems

The industry's partnership with CSIRO SE has been renewed through work on research projects looking at climate change, potential adaptations and implications for biodiversity - more details on the projects are included in research section of this report

Examples of linking with partner organisations

The ECP and NSW DPI have worked together to update water use efficiency targets for rice in both the ECP and Ricecheck programs. The targets are now region specific, recognising the variations in yield due to subtle climatic differences.

The ECP has worked closely with Murray Irrigation (MIL) to develop a biodiversity component for Level 2 groups in the Murray. This builds on the education program run by MIL and encourages a whole of farm approach to vegetation management.

MIL staff have worked with one ECP group in the Murray to develop a vegetation plan for their local area, linking the activities of individual properties and assisting with group planning.

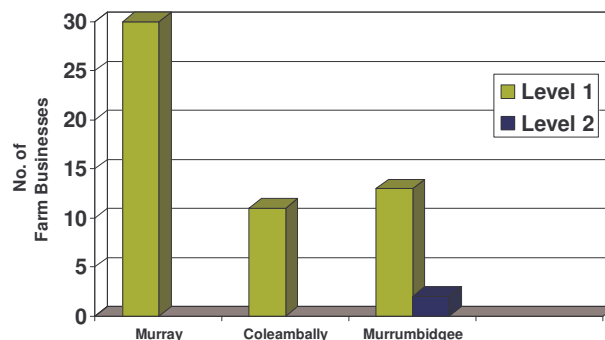
The Murray wetlands working group assisted an ECP group to learn more about wetlands in their area and the assistance available to manage them for protection and enhancement.

Outcomes & Achievements

Recognition of participants

Despite some dip in activity overall those groups which have remained active have continued to progress through the program, achieve recognition and greatly benefit from the program.

30% of participants progressed to a higher level of the program and an additional 7 gained formal recognition



Recognised Environmental Champions by area

Level 1 focuses on meeting legal requirements in terms of chemicals, water license conditions, irrigation education and at least a basic understanding of biodiversity on their farm.

Level 2 focuses on planning and starting to look beyond the farm to opportunities for working with others. It builds on biodiversity knowledge and recognises whole farm and vegetation planning. Participants learn about greenhouse gas emissions, mitigation and abatement. They also look at the strengths, weakness opportunities and threats as a group and individual businesses to help set future directions.

Being formally recognised means that they have provided evidence to show they meet all of the benchmarks for their area. Applications for recognition are independently assessed.

Knowledge

Activities and events specifically targeted at formally building knowledge have included:

- One group has participated in Nitrogen training. Learning about nitrogen cycling and more

efficient use to increase efficiency and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

- Two groups initiated tours to learn about local wetlands, one focussing on the local system, one focusing on opportunities for wetland management on farm.
- Four cluster groups (45 people) have undergone greenhouse training.
- Work cover were guest presenters at two meetings to talk about on farm safety



Wetlands walk in the Murray Valley held by one of the ECP cluster groups

increase their knowledge and find innovative solutions.

- Participation in case study development through filming and interviews.
- A common comment when putting together the ECP case studies was the motivational effect of the cluster groups.
- Undertaking Level 1 gave one participant confidence in having an audit undertaken for their livestock marketing through ensuring their chemical records and storage met regulations.

“I stop and think about what I do on my farm now, whereas I didn’t years ago”, I take more notice of “environmental impact of my actions”

participants during Level 1 review

“It’s (the ECP) certainly made me look at my farming operations with a more holistic approach”

Paul Martin, Barham

Attitude, motivation & confidence

The ECP continues to show that the groups structure and support have a marked effect on attitude, motivation and confidence through encouraging peer mentoring and sharing of ideas.

Evidence of increased confidence and motivation as a result of being involved in the ECP includes:

- Several groups have organised group meetings around topics outside the core program meetings including silo safety, climate risk, soil additives, lagoon system tours, wetlands field day, energy efficient motor conversion. This shows that groups are gaining confidence to use the cluster groups and program to further

“There’s nothing like working in a group to have some incentive to keep up with them. Peer pressure does a wonderful thing for us”

Jamie McKindlay, Caldwell

ECP Leadership & Development Program

The RGA remains interested in running another leadership and development program. Due to cut backs across the industry as a result of the ongoing drought these plans are currently on hold.

Planning and on-ground

The ECP links with other regional programs such as Land and Water Management plans to help encourage and facilitate planning and on-ground change. The ECP does not provide financial incentives, but helps link farmers to funding available.

Some examples of planning and on-ground outcomes that have been achieved through the program include:

- One group undertook group vegetation planning in partnership with Murray Irrigation.
- 65 participants were trained so they can use the RGA's waste oil collection facilities
- 3 participants in different areas noted that they have had brolgas on their property, which they have not noticed for several years.

The ongoing interaction of participants is important to keep farmers planning for the future and motivated to make changes when their finances allow.

“It gives us a chance to co-ordinate some of our strategies”

Wendy McDonald, Caldwell



Group vegetation planning



Waste Oil Collection Facility training



Brolgas in paddock after rainfall

Social

Social outcomes are a key aspect and are important in keeping people involved and working together which leads to group planning and projects.

With the drought causing increasing stress and pressure, cluster group interaction has been invaluable.

“We enjoy the program because it gives us a chance to socialise with our peers, exchange information and stay motivated”

Wendy McDonald, Caldwell

“It's (the ECP) really a process of helping one another”

Tim Garden, Caldwell

“It's (the ECP) really been a good circuit breaker”

Wayne Kerr, Coleambally

Groups continue to say they want more social interaction as part of the program.

Communication

Promoting the Program

Publications

- The ECP has been featured as a chapter in the book “Biodiversity: integrating biodiversity and production” resulting from Tamar NRM’s Balancing Biodiversity and Production conference in 2007.
- Five case studies have been developed featuring groups and individuals from the ECP, they are available in written and DVD format (a snapshot is featured in the centre of this report).
- The ECP website has received 1800 hits.
- Regular newsletters have been produced twice a year giving an update on the ECP and the activities that have been undertaken.
- The Australian Association for Environmental Education NSW chapter’s case study on the ECP has been published on the web at www.aaeensw.org.au

Presentations

9 presentations about the program have been made, reaching 425 people. This included three conferences and meetings with partner organisations.

External Recognition of the Program

Publicity

Over the past year the ECP has attracted 23 positive articles, many about the launch of RGAs waste oil collection facilities.

Program Development & Evolution

Biodiversity

Links between the ECP and land and water management plan have been further developed in the Murray valley through the biodiversity component of Level 2. A LWMP officer now speaks to groups on biodiversity in their area. A follow up one on one vegetation assessment is then completed for each property.

Greenhouse

The greenhouse training within the program continues to be tailored and modified to keep up with changes in climate change policy and the needs of farmers.

Desktop research has helped to develop relative greenhouse gas emissions of some rice growing management techniques to be incorporated into the greenhouse scorecard.

Levels 4 & 5

Development of Levels 4 & 5 has remained on hold over the past year due to reduced staffing levels and resources. Completion of the Level 4 & 5 framework remains a priority when resources are available.

Research

CSIRO research partnership

Through RGA's research partnership with CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems a short research project exploring climate change scenarios and adaptation issues for agriculture and biodiversity has been undertaken.

The project exposed farmers to the latest climate change scenarios for their area and explored adaptation options and further research which is needed. Using the adaptations identified as background a literature review on possible implications for biodiversity was undertaken.

Key findings will be reported through the ECP website.

University of Canberra Biodiversity Research

The University of Canberra's project investigated the value of habitat enhancement and establishment to vertebrates and the value some vertebrates add to the farming system. Field work concluded in early 2008 and the findings will be reported in late 2008.



A Bearded Dragon basking on a fence post in the University of Canberra research site (Photo Christina Castellano)

Acknowledgements

The Australian Rice Industry remains committed to a sustainable future for our communities, environment and industry. The Environmental Champions Program is a key mechanism for achieving our goal.

We thank all those involved for their hard work and commitment including environmental working group members (past and present), participating farmers, partner organisations, funding bodies and RGA staff.

Environmental Champions Program working together with...



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