

The Case for Funding Landcare Facilitators

***Farmers** prepare the ground, manage their crop through its early growth to harvest, and only then, reap their rewards. In the same way, Landcare facilitators prepare the ground within communities, manage projects through to completion, and the community harvests the benefits of a more productive and sustainable landscape.*

In 2010, the Coalition Government committed \$12.5m to support employment of 68 community-based part-time Landcare facilitators. The two peak bodies for community Landcare in Victoria, the Victorian Landcare Council (VLC) and the Farm Tree and Landcare Association (FTLA), believe this funding should be continued, and the numbers of facilitators increased to 100, to support communities right across Victoria. We want a promise from all political parties to strengthen support for Landcare. Here's why

Facilitators help communities get more done

Landcare Facilitators turn community ideas into projects. Working behind the scenes, they provide crucial administrative support. They listen, encourage and provide technical advice on action. They help start new groups, and re-energise established landcare groups. Facilitators do the legwork that community volunteers don't have much time for.

Judy Croker, facilitator in the Mid-Loddon, organises field trips and specialists to bring new skills to Landcare groups, finds funding for demonstration projects and negotiates with government agencies. The **Baringhup Landcare Group** says: "*As full-time farmers, we're all relatively time poor, and without Judy, a lot that we would like to do just would not happen.*"

Our landcare group used to come up with lots of ideas on things that landcare could do but most of these ideas remained just that—ideas! Now with access to a facilitator, ideas lead to projects that engage the community around landcare. For example, we have created a *Farmers Teaching Farmers* discussion group, we are part of a student-run community nursery at the local high school growing endangered native plants for landcare projects and we are setting up an annual fox control program."

Ian Maclagan, President, **Neerim and District Landcare Group**

Most farmers are in their later years. Physically farm work is tiring. Dealing with weed problems, fencing and stock control to keep cover on the ground – especially in hill country. The vagaries of the weather, prices for livestock, breeding and health management of their stock – not to mention their own health. Then there is the bookwork to satisfy Tax Dept and various DEPI departments, budgeting and banks.



We need the continuity of our facilitators to work with us, the various Departments and the local Council. Submitting applications for Grants is invaluable. They are constantly looking outside the square to apply for monies to be spent on projects that, but for this dedication, would not be attempted.

Chrystene Antonis, Chairperson, **Balmattum Sheans Creek Landcare Group**

Facilitators strengthen communities

People trust their local Landcare facilitator. They connect experienced farmers with enthusiastic new landholders who want to learn how to manage their properties. They connect communities and government, finding resources and keeping up with what government programs offer.

Kirsty Skilbeck, the facilitator at **Upper Deep Creek Landcare Network**, is working with landholders affected by this summer's fires, connecting them to experienced land managers and government support as they stabilise exposed gullies, re-fence and replant.

In the **Upper Goulburn Landcare Network**, facilitator Judy Watts has been helping an established group whose active members had dwindled to a core of 5 or 6 people. The establishment of a trail on the old railway line from Tallarook to Mansfield has sparked that group's interest in improving a seven acre bush reserve at a stopping point in Homewood. Judy has provided information on grants to support what the group wants to do, and given advice on writing and printing information brochures.



Landcare is a platform for long-term change

For 28 years, Landcare has been leading the adoption of sustainable farming practices and increasing habitat quality across Victoria's farmlands and peri-urban holdings. This is not something government can do on its own—it needs volunteer effort from communities. Landcare is a credible, trusted platform for long-term change, helping to make landscapes and communities more resilient.

Project Hindmarsh's Planting Weekend in the Wimmera is the longest running of its kind in Australia. Each year since 1998, over 200 volunteers migrate to the Little Desert Nature Lodge for a weekend of fun and hard work, helping to revegetate and restore native vegetation on public and private land. The vegetation link between the Little and Big Deserts has been rebuilt, and corridors strengthened from Lake Hindmarsh and the Western Wimmera to the Grampians and beyond. Behind each year's projects has been the Hindmarsh Landcare Network's facilitator, doing the organising that allows volunteers to do what they do best.

In the Mornington Peninsula, with the help of their Facilitator, Landcare groups are forming a Landcare Network. They see the need for a Landcare presence that can take the big issues of landscape health and work with landholders and local government across the Peninsula. The need to keep these issues in public debate and in the minds of landholders won't change anytime soon, and a Network will keep Landcare there for the long-term.

With their new facilitators, Landcare Groups and Networks have started new groups, developed more projects, and drawn more funds and partners into projects. A small investment in facilitators is making a big difference to communities.

South Cathedral Landcare Group formed in February 2013. Had it not been for the facilitators from Upper Goulburn Landcare Network I feel quite sure it wouldn't have happened. Our initial primary focus is on blackberry control, an issue that is currently

out of control and costing landholders, farmers and the general community dearly. With the help of the facilitators we have been successful in obtaining a significant grant from the Victorian Blackberry Taskforce to start addressing the problem. The facilitators are always available to answer our questions, provide information and guidance. Being 'the new kids on the block' we would have had difficulty finding our way through all the rules, regulations and red tape.

Gail Dollimore, South Cathedral Landcare Group

Expertise is just as important as funding. The facilitator with the **Broken Catchment Landcare Network** has sourced funds independently of the CMA for soil erosion works, field days, and local media coverage on erosion control. Enlisting the expertise of DEPI staff, she's been able to mount projects that improve farm productivity, protect riparian vegetation and improve water quality, and reduce road infrastructure costs by reducing sand wash into culverts on the Hume Freeway.

But funding for projects is important too. It's difficult to maintain enthusiasm when there's little funding for work to which local communities have made a commitment. Government and Landcare need to look closely at funding levels for community-initiated projects to look at the trends across regions, and year-by-year.

Landcare – what does the evidence say?

Comment from Professor Allan Curtis, Professor of Integrated Environmental Management, Charles Sturt University, a leading researcher in community-based NRM

There is abundant evidence that landcare in Victoria has mobilised a large proportion of rural landholders and successfully engaged the wider public in group activities with a high focus on the public good. Landcare engages rural landholders in activities where they learn with their peers, learn by doing and learn by reflecting on experience, including from the results of monitoring environmental conditions.

There is evidence that participation enhances landholder awareness, knowledge, management skills and leads to the adoption of practices expected to lead to more sustainable farming practices and improved environmental condition. There is also evidence that landcare activity affects the management practices of non-members.

Landcare groups operate at the scale where there are “ties that bind” and through the rules, norms and reciprocal relationships they establish, they create social capital that enhances group outcomes, including the ability of groups and networks to deliver large-scale on-ground work in a cost-effective manner. Working through groups and networks, property and catchment planning can be integrated in ways that ensure that landcare activities address the causes of land degradation.

Landcare also provides a forum where difficult issues can be explored, and a platform that enables government to respond quickly to local issues, as was the case with landcare groups working with the Goulburn Broken CMA in the recovery process after the Black Saturday fires in 2008 or after the floods in Western Victoria in 2010. Groups and networks can also scale-up their activities to improve the management of key environmental assets, including as partners with government agencies and NGOs.

Landcare networks (voluntary federations of landcare groups) often provide the missing tier in NRM between local, place-based communities and regional organisations. Networks operate at a larger (i.e. landscape) scale than local groups and are therefore more likely to effect improvement in resource condition by coordinating the work of groups, and engaging local government, government agencies, the private sector and NGOs in partnerships for on-ground work.