



# Landholder Participation in Loddon River Health Projects

## A summary of recent research

The North Central Catchment Management Authority (CMA) manages two significant Loddon river health projects with funding from the Victorian Government.

The Upper Loddon and Campaspe Priority Reaches and Loddon Stressed River projects seek to protect and improve the health of Victoria's second longest waterway. Activities include addressing vegetation removal, habitat loss and weeds; improving fish habitat; and achieving a fully fenced Loddon River.

Actively engaging the community in river improvement activities is vital. As much of the work done through these projects is on private or licensed public land, there is reliance upon landholder participation to achieve project goals.

Funding for these projects is secured until 2011–12 but is uncertain beyond this. It is important for both Loddon river health projects to know more about current and potential landholder participation. This will assist with future planning and activities to increase the likelihood of long-term attitude change, to build on work done to date, and to ensure that achievements will be enduring and sustainable. In response to this need, a research project has been undertaken by the North Central CMA in partnership with a research team led by Professor Allan Curtis from Charles Sturt University's Institute for Land, Water and Society.

## The research project

The research project was conducted to determine the following:

- § The effectiveness of the Loddon river health projects in working with landholders.
- § Constraints to implementation of recommended river health practices by landholders who have not been involved in the projects.
- § Factors influencing the extent of long-term commitment by landholders to river health project outcomes.

A survey was mailed to 223 landholders with licensed or freehold frontage in the project areas asking about their management practices since the projects commenced. Of the 108 useable

responses, almost all were men (90%) with a median age of 55 years, and a small majority (53%) identifying themselves as non-farmers. Most of those who live in the district where their property is located have done so for many years (median 30 years).

Interviews with 30 people were also conducted, including agency staff, landholders involved in the project, and landholders yet to participate.

## Key findings

The research compared the practices and attitudes of Loddon river health project participants and non-participants. Some of the findings were as follows:

- § The Loddon river health projects have engaged a much higher proportion of landholders than most natural resource management programs.
- § People who have been involved in the projects are more focused on environmental values than non-participants and are less concerned about government taking a stronger role in natural resource management.
- § Project participants have higher awareness and more knowledge of river health issues, are more confident in recommended practices (e.g. installing offstream watering points, fencing to manage stock access) and are implementing these at much higher levels than non-participants.
- § Project participants are very satisfied with the support provided by the North Central CMA and Department of Primary Industries staff. Suggested areas for improvement include increased feedback about the value of work undertaken, more advice about future management approaches, and a greater effort to engage less willing landholders in the projects.

## Constraints to participation

The main reasons for landholders not participating in the projects are that they haven't been approached, are not aware that the projects exist, or consider that their frontage is in good condition and that no work is needed.

Some constraints to future project participation include the cost of required materials and equipment; the impact of flood events on fences and other infrastructure; and the potential risk of fires from fuel build up behind fences. There is also some lack of clarity about who is responsible for managing river frontages.

It is important to consider the range of values and attitudes when seeking to involve landholders in the river health projects. Most non-participants in river health projects were more production-focused when considering future management of their riparian areas. They currently have no plans to change what they are doing, and their vision for their river frontage is to increase soil and bank stability, and reduce weeds. However, some non-participants were committed to improving both productivity and the environment along the river.

### Long-term commitment to river health

While a 'long-term commitment' to river health is difficult to define, the research identified landholder attitudes and practices that reflect this. They include:

- § Acknowledging responsibility for maintaining infrastructure (e.g. fences) provided through the projects.
- § Undertaking ongoing maintenance of this infrastructure.
- § Engaging in appropriate land management before and after the installation of infrastructure.
- § Ongoing involvement in natural resource management programs (e.g. Bush Tender).
- § Demonstrated acceptance of the public benefit of caring for riparian areas.

Landholders emphasised the need for long-term commitment by agencies and governments towards the cost of maintaining infrastructure, and through one-on-one extension support that reinforces the value of volunteer contributions and improves landholders' management knowledge. It also needs to be recognised that scientific knowledge and community values change over time, and that management actions need to adapt to this.

Some of the people interviewed talked about what was needed to build long-term commitment to river health amongst landholders. Some things that can be done through the projects include:

- § Working with landholders who are already willing to be involved in river health projects.
- § Recognising that long-term commitment is the end result of long-term engagement.
- § Demonstrating project success on the ground.

### Future challenges

Building long-term commitment to river health is a challenge for projects and agency staff. Agencies need to consider the rate and level at which projects need to be implemented at the property and sub-catchment scales to achieve goals, the degree to which this can be achieved with willing participants, and the level of extension and funding support required.

It is difficult to demonstrate project success given that motivations and final goals are uncertain and likely change over the long-term. It is therefore likely that some 'shifting of the goal posts' will be required, ensuring that learning is built into project delivery along the way.

Agency staff will need to have strong extension skills and be employed to work with landholders over a number of years. The current short-term nature of many projects and the entry-level nature of staff positions can work against the goal of securing long-term commitment amongst landholders.

### Next steps

At least 90% of survey respondents have values that suggest that it would be possible to engage them in river health projects. Evidence suggests that some people have not been involved simply because they have not been approached. It is possible for agencies to change attitudes by involving landholders in discussions and learning, and working together towards project goals.

The North Central CMA will use these research findings to refine community engagement planning and approaches for river health projects. The report will also be shared with other regional agencies to maximise the use of this information.

For the full research report or a more detailed overview document, visit either of the websites below:

[www.nccma.vic.gov.au](http://www.nccma.vic.gov.au)

<http://athene.riv.csu.edu.au/~acurtis/index>