

STATE SALINITY COUNCIL

Newsletter of the Western Australian State Salinity Council

December 1997

Community action provides the key to finding salinity solutions

The driving force behind efforts to turn salinity around in Western Australia will be private landholders and community groups, according to State Salinity Council Chairman Alex Campbell.



Alex Campbell

"It will always be the commitment of private individuals, groups and the community across Western Australia which will determine the success of our efforts to turn back salinity.

"The Government, through the State Salinity Action Plan, has a significant role to play. It has provided the lead by

developing a new framework within which a coordinated and concerted effort can be made."

But Mr Campbell, a Narrikup farmer, is realistic about the effort required: "This is not an issue with quick or easy solutions. We have to think in the long term.

"It's taken 100 years for rising water tables to reach the current critical stage. It will take probably that long to get it back to a level that we can live with comfortably.

"The Salinity Action Plan puts forward a realistic approach to tackle this problem over an initial 30-year time frame; 30 years to start turning salinity around; 30 years to plant three million hectares of trees and shrubs into the Western Australian landscape.

"The Salinity Action Plan is about everybody in the community taking responsibility for our most serious environmental problem; it's about a partnership between the private sector and government; and it's about identifying the best ways of supporting groups and individuals in the private sector who are devoted to finding solutions to salinity."

"The Salinity Action Plan is not set in concrete. It is a starting point. Community and technical experts will all contribute to developing and moulding the plan as issues arise and processes are tested."

Mr Campbell believes the coordinated government-private sector approach of the past year has produced results which will help underpin the work of private individuals and groups.

Mr Campbell said the State Salinity Council had been established to help coordinate the government's approach to the problem and the council's main strength came from its unique membership.

"We have all the stakeholders coming together in one united front - business, community, primary industry and conservation interests joining the four government agencies involved in salinity action - Agriculture Western Australia, the Department of Conservation and Land Management, the Water and Rivers Commission and Department of Environmental Protection.

"Never before has there been such a cohesive approach to tackling salinity.

"As a farmer who wants to see the sustainable use of our natural resources into the future, I know that good farm economics and sustainability can work hand in hand," Mr Campbell said.

State Salinity Council Membership

(Italics denotes deputy)

- Alex Campbell** - Chairman, Narrikup farmer
- Phillip Jennings** - Environmental representative
- Rachel Siewert* - Conservation Council of WA
- John Sibly** - Alcoa of Australia
- Graham Slessar* - Alcoa of Australia
- Ian Purse** - Farm Forestry Development Group
- Kevin McMenemy** - WA Farmers Federation
- Garry English* - WA Farmers Federation, Soil and Land Conservation Council
- Barry Oates* - WA Farmers Federation, Geographe Catchment Council
- Barry Court** - Pastoralists and Graziers Association
- Lawry Pitman* - Pastoralists and Graziers Association
- Rex Edmondson** - Soil and Land Conservation Council
- Ross Donald** - Rural Adjustment and Finance Corp.
- Peter Cooke* - Rural Adjustment and Finance Corp.
- Ian Burston** - Water and Rivers Commission
- Ken Webster* - Water and Rivers Commission
- Bernard Bowen** - Environmental Protection Authority
- Tom Day** - National Parks and Nature Conservation Authority
- Marion Blackwell* - National Parks and Nature Conservation Authority
- Leon Watt** - Lands and Forest Commission
- Pat McNamara* - Lands and Forest Commission
- Ken Pech** - WA Municipal Association
- Christine Hardwick* - WA Municipal Association

Focus catchments lead by example

Catchment and community groups were the most important and effective force in developing sustainable farming systems to address the issues of land degradation associated with salinity, according to Deputy Premier Hendy Cowan who recently toured a focus catchment in the Shire of Trayning.

Mr Cowan said the Yeelanna Catchment Group was an outstanding example of how community, corporate and government groups have worked together to produce an innovative package of increased production and sustainability.

"The Yeelanna catchment group is a classic example of local communities leading the way in efforts to combat salinity and land degradation," the Deputy Premier said.

These groups are the most important and effective force in developing sustainable farming systems which address the issues of land degradation associated with salinity.

Mr Cowan, who is leading the Ministerial group overseeing the Government's Salinity Action Plan, said that without doubt, salinity control was one of the most important land management tasks facing Western Australia now and into the next century.

"The extent of the problem is enormous, but with a major community effort supported by the Government we can turn things around in the longer term."

The efforts of the Yeelanna farmers have been supported by the Alcoa Landcare Project and National Landcare Program grants to plan and implement sustainable land use systems. These include contour surface water control, revegetation of groundwater recharge areas, alley farming and higher-water use pastures.

Catchment Group Coordinator Ron Foord said the Yeelanna group had successfully combined productivity improvements with land conservation activities.

"We have identified the advantages of working together and the upshot of this is that we have common approaches across farm boundaries," Mr Foord said.

"A catchment strategy for farming systems, based on soil types and land management options, has been developed by the whole group and individual farmers use this blueprint to guide their own decision making processes.

"We now share our experiences with other land managers and provide our visitors with the opportunity to hear from farmers about the cost and benefits of different approaches," he said.

The Deputy Premier said the impact of the work 'on the ground' in Yeelanna had been more than doubled because farmers had more than matched external funding with their own money and labour.

This was in line with the principles of the Salinity Action Plan which acknowledged that much of the investment to overcome salinity would have to come from landowners and private industry. This private investment would be supported by the State Government.



Deputy Premier Hendy Cowan inspects some of the tree planting work carried out by members of the Yeelanna Catchment Group.

Salinity Action Plan: key activities in the first year

The launch of the Salinity Action Plan in November, 1996 brought together community, industry and government to work on salinity issues. The Salinity Action Plan aims to:

- reduce further deterioration and wherever possible, recover existing salt-affected land;
- protect and restore key water resources and high-value wetlands;
- maintain natural (biological and physical) diversity; and
- protect designated infrastructure affected by salinity.

Some key achievements in the first year include:

Rural infrastructure

A management committee and project coordinator have been appointed to oversee the Rural Towns Program which currently involves 13 towns seeking to manage salinity. Some \$250,000 has been allocated as grants. The towns involved include: Brookton, Corrigin, Cranbrook, Dowerin, Dumbleyung, Katanning, Kellerberin, Merredin, Morawa, Narmbeem, Perenjori, Tambellup and Wagin. Tree planting has been completed using seedlings and expertise provided by the Department of Conservation and Land Management and Agriculture Western Australia. Longer term action plans are being developed for the 13 towns and local government areas involved in preparation for works.

Focus catchment support teams

Thirty focus catchments have started work on planning to manage salinity on a whole-of-catchment basis. Two have completed the planning stage and are moving to implementation. Nine focus catchment support teams within Agriculture Western Australia are substantially established and six new hydrologists will be appointed in the next two months. Key technical staff from the Water and Rivers Commission and the Department of Conservation and Land Management are also involved.

Maritime pine project

The Department of Conservation and Land Management's Maritime Pine Project is under way with more than 1,300 hectares planted in 1997. Initial plantings are focused around Perth (including Dandaragan, Gingin, West Dale) and Mt Barker (including South Stirlings, Wellstead, Bremer Bay).

Increased water use by crops and plants

Agriculture Western Australia has instigated research and development projects to further develop higher water using crops and pastures. These include integrated tree projects, key grazing systems projects and projects on crop productivity and lucerne development.

Augmented clearing control process

A Memorandum of Understanding to protect remnant vegetation on private land in agricultural regions of Western Australia has been implemented. It coordinates all aspects of government-regulated clearing controls to create a single evaluation process. A Natural Resources Adjustment Scheme has been established.

The Scheme aims to expedite adjustment of property ownership where this assists landholders affected by clearing controls and improves management of remnant vegetation.

Management and protection of Crown reserves

A major program of rehabilitation and revegetation of reserves is now under way, particularly in small to medium sized reserves within highly cleared regions. Some funds will also be expended on priority land purchases where these greatly improve the protection and management of important Crown reserves in highly cleared catchments.

Land for wildlife

The Department of Conservation and Land Management's Land for Wildlife Scheme was launched earlier this year. The principal aim of this voluntary scheme is to increase the area of privately owned wildlife habitat under active management. By the end of September, 139 property owners had applied to join the scheme.

Roadside Conservation Committee

Liaison with government agencies, local government and community groups on roadside conservation issues is a continuing focus of the Roadside Conservation Committee (RCC). Workshops have been convened to develop skills in roadside mapping and to provide information regarding the value and management of roadside vegetation. The RCC is now providing flora road signs to local government authorities to encourage their participation in the registration and protection of high conservation road reserves.

Business planning and management

Demand is increasing for farm business planning, training and implementation grants. A new Group Professional Advice Support Scheme is being established to provide financial support to groups that require the assistance of professional advisers.

Water-use evaluation approach

Agriculture Western Australia has developed a water-use calculator which is being trialed in the field. This electronic tool helps to calculate water use for different farming systems and technologies. The tool will assist farmers to establish best practice for particular catchments and farming areas.

Review of groundwater salinity investigative program

The Water and Rivers Commission is completing its groundwater salinity and mapping investigation program in the South Coast region during 1997/98 and has reviewed the next priority area to proceed with similar work. Strong support has been received from communities in the northern agricultural region and the Swan Catchment group and these will form the major priority areas in 1997/98 (Swan catchment) and 1998/99 (northern agricultural region).

Reform of drainage regulation

Rex Edmondson (Soil and Land Conservation Council) and Ken Pech (WA Municipal Association) will oversee the Salinity Action Plan commitment to improve drainage controls currently exercised under the Soil and Land Conservation Act. This has already involved discussion with many farmers, contractors and catchment groups.

Voluntary nature conservation covenants

Cabinet has approved the drafting of amendments to the Conservation and Land Management Act to authorise the Minister for the Environment to be able to enter into voluntary covenants for nature conservation purposes to be registered on freehold, leasehold or Crown reserve land.

Regular program of satellite imagery

A project has been established to develop integrated biophysical monitoring which includes salinity and vegetation condition monitoring. In addition, the Department of Land Administration is committed to major funding of a project to improve contour intervals in a digital elevation data set. Part of the 'satellite imagery' will be augmented by forthcoming appointments of hydrologists to Agriculture Western Australia.

Access to information

Information kits on appropriate tree species and decision support aids are being made available to focus catchment support teams and a series of *TreeNotes* is being produced as part of the new Farm Forest Advisory Service. Some information on revegetation is also available via the internet.

Setting environmental objectives and criteria

A working group of Department of Environmental Protection and regional Agriculture Western Australia officers has been preparing a set of principles for the identification and selection of priority catchments which will allow regions to select catchments by their own community process. The use of model catchment planning and management methods will ensure the right environmental objectives are included for each catchment.

Potable water resource catchments

The Water and Rivers Commission has a resource identification program to enable commitments in potable ground water catchments to be fulfilled. A new position has been created to maintain and progress research and demonstration sites to improve understanding of salinity treatment processes. Regional support for planning and implementation of catchment restoration programs has also commenced. Recovery teams have been established for Collie, Warren, Kent and Denmark catchments.

Key wetlands and natural diversity catchments

The Department of Conservation and Land Management has allocated funds to three areas for 1997/98:

- an expanded program is underway in the Lake Toolibin Catchment;
- planning has commenced for work in the Muir-Unicup and Esperance Lakes catchments;
- completion of the management plan for the Esperance Lakes Nature Reserves.

Biological survey program

A biological survey is underway in the central band of the wheatbelt (roughly the area between Hyden/Merredin in the east and York/Narrogin in the west). Currently 67 wetland areas have been selected and sampled. More than 200 plant quadrats have been sampled and 100 animal quadrats (pit lines and invertebrate trap lines) established. They will be sampled in early summer.

Monitoring program for wetlands

A total of 25 wetlands (including a range of types) across the agricultural zone have been chosen by the Department of Conservation and Land Management for monitoring. Physical and chemical parameters are being sampled at these wetlands. Recording instruments (eg depth gauges) are being established or reconditioned. A contract has been let to establish the vegetation monitoring sites at these wetlands. Wetland birds, frogs and invertebrates are also being sampled.

\$23.5m in first round of Natural Heritage Trust funding to WA

Western Australia has received the 'first instalment' of more than \$30 million to be allocated in 1997/98 through the Federal Government's Natural Heritage Trust.

The initial funds will support a wide range of projects in agricultural sustainability and water and land management, including a large number of projects which will deliver results under the State Government's Salinity Action Plan.

The initial allocation of \$23.5 million was announced by Federal Minister John Anderson in Perth in October.

This is in addition to about \$28 million already being spent by Western Australia on measures aimed at addressing the salinity problem, as well as other funds invested in natural resource management.

In total, 336 community and agency partnership projects across the State have had funding approved in the first round and others are being considered for the future.

The successful projects have a strong focus on rural and regional Western Australia where on the ground action is most needed.

Deputy Premier HENDY COWAN said the stage was set for a long term and concerted campaign to conserve natural heritage, support agricultural sustainability and to address environmental problems.

Mr Cowan said the Natural Heritage Trust would give community groups and others the financial resources required to implement and further develop locally based programs.

New advisory service for farm forestry

A new coordinated service to assist farmers integrate commercial tree crops into their existing farming operations has been launched in Western Australia.

The Farm Forestry Advisory Service is a joint initiative of the Department of Conservation and Land Management and Agriculture Western Australia with additional funding from the Federal Department of Primary Industries' Farm Forestry Program.

The new service is part of the State's support for the Salinity Action Plan's target of planting three million hectares of trees and shrubs in agricultural areas over the next three decades.

The service will concentrate on high rainfall areas (of more than 600 mm) where the successful growth of commercial species has been demonstrated. It will promote farm forestry and encourage land holders to consider integrating tree crops with other agricultural enterprises.

Land managers who are keen to include farm forestry in their farm plan will be able to use the Farm Forestry Advisory Service to help understand the process of designing integrated farm forestry systems. The service will also help land owners get access to learning opportunities and information services to manage and market their tree crops.

A new series of information on farm forestry - *TreeNotes* - is being produced on a wide range of topics including markets, economic assessments of various configurations, site requirements and tree management.

Information is available from offices of Agriculture Western Australia and Conservation and Land Management.



At its regional meetings State Salinity Council members hear first hand from farmers about problems and solutions.

Regional meetings

The State Salinity Council's first regional meeting included discussions with community and local government representatives in Brookton and Narrogin.

The council was briefed on salinity issues, in particular Brookton's role in the Salinity Action Plan's Rural Towns Program and salinity management at Toolibin Lake near Narrogin.

Council members saw first hand examples of focus catchments, recovery catchments and the rural towns program, as well as speaking to the people managing these projects.

Salinity Council Newsletter

This is the first issue of the State Salinity Council Newsletter. It will be published quarterly. For information about any of the articles in this or subsequent issues (or any information about the State Salinity Council itself) please contact:

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