

Tarcutta Valley Landcare



Landcare
Murrumbidgee

Committee's report and project updates

Richard Eggins, Peter McCallum and Bob Schofield, Tarcutta Valley Landcare Group

To state the obvious, our summer has been disastrous for much of our environment, with prolonged extremely hot temperatures, and dry thunderstorms causing lightning strikes with multiple fires in grazing and native forest areas, and pine plantations.

Soil moisture was reduced to near drought levels, leading to fast diminishing dam levels and feed volumes for grazing production systems.

Our Landcare Executive have been working to maintain community activities at local and Murrumbidgee levels to coordinate ongoing and proposed projects, while working closely with key players in Murrumbidgee Landcare and the now operational Riverina Local Land Services.

Major erosion repairs on the Tarcutta Creek are soon to

commence, under the guidance of Peter Beal (Riverina Local Land Services). This should be of great interest to many land holders.

The Cross Property Planning project continues to expand and provide extensive activities, many of them open for all interested community members.

The "Environment Awareness Creekscape to Reservoir Reserve Walking Track" project around the Tarcutta Village is coming together under the leadership of Jenny Cowie, with support from a number of local progressive people, and now approval of strategic agency offices (NSW Department of Lands, Wagga Wagga City Council and Roads and Maritime Services).

Looking forward to a mild and moist autumn.

Autumn climate outlook for the Tarcutta Valley and region

Robbie Lennard, Wagga Bureau of Meteorology office

Temperatures: Autumn temperatures are likely to be slightly warmer than average for the season, with a 50-55% chance of exceeding median maximum temperatures, and around a 65% chance of exceeding median minimum temperatures. For more info: www.bom.gov.au/climate/ahead/temp.seaus.shtml.

Rainfall: The chances of a wetter or drier than normal season are roughly equal. For more info: www.bom.gov.au/climate/ahead/rain.seaus.shtml.

El Niño: The El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) remains neutral, however recent observations indicate that warming of the tropical Pacific Ocean is occurring, with most international climate models showing temperatures approaching or exceeding El Niño thresholds during the coming winter. El Niño is often associated with below-average rainfall during the second half of the year across large parts of southern and inland eastern Australia. Daytime temperatures also tend to be above average over southern Australia. For more info: www.bom.gov.au/climate/enso.

This seasonal outlook is based on data available in late March 2014. For further info, and regularly updated predictions, check out the Bureau of Meteorology seasonal outlook web pages provided.

FREE workshop!

Pasture cropping and ecological agriculture

All interested land holders are invited to a FREE workshop, looking at alternatives to conventional grazing enterprises. Come along to learn about techniques that may help improve the resilience, sustainability and profitability of your farm!

When: Wednesday 30th April 2014

9.00 am to 12.30 pm, followed by lunch and an optional site visit to a local property after lunch for those that are interested (finishing around 3.00 pm)

Where: Humula Sports Club

Cost: Free! All land holder's welcome

RSVP: Please register, for catering purposes, by Tuesday 22nd April to Nicole Maher (Murrumbidgee Landcare): 0487 953 776, or nmaher@mli.org.au

Local flora and fauna survey results

Nicole Maher, Cross Property Project Officer, Murrumbidgee Landcare

Background to the surveys

As part of the Cross Property Planning (CPP) project, Murrumbidgee Landcare organised a series of 30 flora and fauna surveys to be undertaken by Dr Fiona Christie (University of Melbourne) and Alison Elvin (Natural Capital). The surveys were conducted in September 2013 on the properties of 24 land holders involved in the CPP project across the Humula/Tarcutta, Kyeamba and Junee/Illabo regions.

The aim of the surveys was to provide a snapshot of species diversity on farms throughout the region, and to provide land holders with information about the species found on their properties, along with the implications that may have for their ongoing management.

Survey techniques used

The surveys were conducted on two hectare sites of native vegetation (either remnant or planted) on each property.

Dr Fiona Christie went to each site in the early morning and late afternoon, and recorded all birds seen or heard during a 20 minute period.

Alison Elvin selected a 50 m x 20 m area within each 2 ha site, and recorded and identified all visible flora and fauna within that area. Alison also recorded details about the groundcover (litter, bare ground and presence of mosses and lichens), fallen timber and twigs, the presence of hollow-bearing trees and logs, general soil type, aspect of the site, the presence of rocky outcrops or boulders, and land use activities on the site (both current and past).

Overall results

The survey findings were very positive, particularly in an intensively farmed landscape with recent catastrophic

natural disasters, including drought, intense storms and floods, and bushfire.

Across the 30 sites, the surveys recorded:

- Approximately 90 species of native birds
- 7 species of threatened birds: superb parrot, varied sittella, flame robin, scarlet robin, brown treecreeper, grey crowned babbler and diamond firetail
- Over 10 other native fauna species, including echidna, bearded dragon lizard, pobblebonk (eastern banjo frog) and long-necked tortoise
- Over 150 species of native plants, including trees, shrubs, forbs, grasses and sedges.

The survey sites covered five major vegetation communities - box gum grassy woodlands, inland grey box grassy woodlands, dry sclerophyll forests, river red gum forests and revegetation areas. The box gum grassy woodland and inland grey box woodland are both classified as threatened ecological communities.

Humula/Tarcutta survey results

Three land holders in the Humula/Tarcutta group participated in the surveys. All three properties surveyed have extensive areas of native vegetation cover, from native grass pastures to box gum grassy woodlands and dry sclerophyll forests. The three sites are all currently rotationally grazed, with little to no inputs of fertiliser or herbicide.

Around 20 species of native birds were found at each of the three sites. This included three threatened species - the brown treecreeper, flame robin and scarlet robin. Superb parrots were also recorded at one property.

All three sites had a high diversity of native vegetation species, with many forbs and small shrubs and very few exotic grasses or woody weeds. One site had been affected



Far left: Hollows in mature box gum trees are important habitat for many bird and other animal species

Left: Dead timber (both standing and fallen) provides critical habitat for birds, reptiles and mammals

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by the cyclonic storm in 2011, which flattened many of the old hollow-bearing eucalypts. However most of these fallen trees have been left on the ground, where they continue to provide valuable habitat for reptiles, mammals and birds, and numerous sapling recruits are now emerging.

A complete list of all the flora and fauna species recorded during the surveys is available. If you would like a copy, please contact Nicole Maher at Murrumbidgee Landcare: nmaher@mli.org.au, or 0487 953 776.

What can we learn from these surveys?

One of the most striking correlations observed from the survey data related to the size of a vegetation remnant, and its floristic and structural diversity (ie the number of different species and plant sizes within a remnant). Larger and more diverse remnants had a much higher number of bird species found there, and were also more likely to have threatened bird species living there. Remnants that were in close proximity to other native vegetation remnants were also more likely to have a higher number of bird species found there.

Importantly, the smaller insect-eating and nectar-eating woodland birds that are currently declining in our region dominate the bird species recorded in large and ecologically intact remnants. In contrast, remnants that have been cleared for farming and have less floristic and structural complexity are dominated by exotic grass and weed species, and generally record few of the declining insectivorous woodland birds.

The shape, age and connectivity of revegetation areas also affected the suite of bird species found living there, with long, linear sites not inter-connected with larger remnants tending to record mostly common species, exotics such as starlings and sparrows, and many noisy miners (an aggressive native bird that out-competes woodland birds for territory).

Many farmers surveyed are making significant efforts to link up their remnant and revegetation areas with other remnants and mature paddock trees, both throughout their own properties and across into neighbouring farms, increasing the overall landscape connectivity without adversely impacting on productivity.

Another encouraging finding was the number of land holders conserving their tree hollows, dead standing trees and the litter of woody debris and large fallen timber, providing critical habitat for local animal species.

The enthusiasm and vision of the participants of the project is very heartening and bodes well for the continued conservation of the flora and fauna living on and around their farms.

Recommendations for future works

The following are some recommendations for land holders to help protect and enhance the native flora and fauna on your properties, based on the results of our surveys:

- Control exotic annual and perennial grasses and woody weeds with grazing strategies that give the perennial native species sufficient rest periods from grazing pressure to set viable seed. To reduce the impact of annual grasses, graze them heavily early in the season, then remove grazing once the native species begin to grow. If grazing rotations aren't possible due to fencing restrictions, slashing exotic annuals before seeding is a viable option
- Control weeds from scattered and isolated patches first, steadily working towards dense infestations over time
- Add the seed of desired native species onto areas bared-out from weed death, as without any other competition the weeds will simply grow again next year
- Maintain year-round ground cover, with living plants, dense leaf litter and cryptogams (organisms such as fungi, lichens and mosses)
- Monitor and release biological control agents for weeds such as patterson's curse, horehound, St John's wort and blackberry
- Retain fallen hollow logs on the ground, and dead trees with hollows (remember to balance the maintenance of woody debris with the potential for fire fuel load)
- Consider adding "perch poles" with indents or hollows as connectors between vegetation sites, for birds and small mammals to move around with less risk of predation
- Continue with feral animal control wherever and whenever possible, ideally coordinated with your neighbours
- Continue increasing connectivity across the farm and broader landscape with plantings; where possible, increase the size of plantings to reduce the edge effects
- Protect old, often dying paddock trees and encourage recruits to grow around them - this may require assistance with fencing
- Encourage and conserve areas of thick regrowth where appropriate, to provide stepping stones for fauna to shelter, breed and maintain their territory
- Consider connecting vegetation sites to the nearest dam or waterpoint with revegetation, and possibly include the dam into the conservation area.

For more information on the flora and fauna surveys, or any of the discussion and recommendations from the results, contact Nicole Maher at Murrumbidgee Landcare: nmaher@mli.org.au, or 0487 953 776.

Welcome from the new Riverina Local Land Services

Sam Archer, Chair, Riverina Local Land Services

The new Local Land Services (LLS) model is a once in a generation opportunity to bring together inter-connected services at the centre of productive farming systems and healthy landscapes. It's an opportunity to provide customer focussed, cost effective services within a productive working landscape across the four pillars at the centre of our new organisation, these are: natural resource management, biosecurity, emergency services and farm extension.

Landcare members and Landcare groups have in the past played a significant role in the delivery of natural resource management outcomes throughout the Murrumbidgee region. The Riverina LLS will be looking to Landcare as a key partner in delivery of on-ground activities and capacity building as we work to deliver outcomes that are good for the environment, farm productivity and our communities.

As an example, we have run two Landcare initiated programmes in the last month around bushfire recovery and drought preparedness. They have been held on farms with a combination of staff from our farm extension, natural resource management and biosecurity teams

demonstrating cost effective practices that enable farmers to profitably work through challenging seasonal conditions and improve the environment at the same time.

I look forward to working with the Tarcutta Valley Landcare Group and Murrumbidgee Landcare to deliver outcomes at the core of our respective organisations.



Sam Archer, Chair of the Riverina Local Land Services

Native vegetation: New self-assessable clearing codes

Allie Hendy, Senior Strategic Land Services Officer (Native Vegetation), Riverina Local Land Services

The NSW government is reforming native vegetation management in NSW to strike the right balance between efficient agricultural management and protecting the environment.

Last year the NSW Government created a new native vegetation regulation, created a new clearing exemption, and improved the ability of land holders to protect their properties from bushfires.

The Government also allowed for the creation of self-assessable codes for low-risk activities. These are the first in a series of self-assessable codes as part of the changes to the regulation. The codes place trust in land holders to manage their properties sustainably while maintaining environmental standards.

There are three self-assessable codes that are expected to go on public exhibition for a period of 8 weeks during March to May 2014. These cover:

- Clearing isolated paddock trees in a cultivated area,
- Thinning native vegetation, and
- Clearing invasive native species.

In some situations, the codes can remove the need for Property Vegetation Plans (PVPs). However, there are circumstances where these codes will not apply, such as high risk clearing activities involving native vegetation near rivers and creeks, or threatened species where PVPs

will remain a necessary requirement. Feedback and input into these codes is encouraged from all land holders, community groups and other stakeholders.

The codes will be supported by ongoing education and compliance by the Office of Environment and Heritage to prevent illegal clearing. Local Land Services will continue to provide extension services, advice and assistance to land holders on native vegetation management.

The next steps in the Government's reform agenda include more self-assessable codes later this year, new Property Vegetation Plan assessment rules, a new biodiversity offsets policy for major developments, and modernising the state's biodiversity legislation.

Further information

Updates on the review of the native vegetation regulation are available at: www.environment.nsw.gov.au/vegetation/ReviewofNVRegulations.htm

To register your interest in the development of the self-assessable codes, contact the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage:

Email: native.vegetation@environment.nsw.gov.au

Phone: 131 555

Cross Property Planning project update

Jacinta Christie, Cross Property Project Manager, Murrumbidgee Landcare

Murrumbidgee Landcare's Cross Property Planning (CPP) project involves 64 land holders across the Tarcutta/Humula, Kyeamba and Junee/Illabo regions. Currently around half of these land holders have received funding for on-ground works, for projects including:

- Fencing and planting tree lines or patches
- Fencing and planting along creek lines
- Planting scattered paddock trees or groves
- Fencing off and enhancing existing remnant vegetation (especially with understorey species)
- Fencing and planting around dams
- Erosion control
- Control of foxes and rabbits.

Throughout the last year, the project has offered workshops and training on topics such as integrated weed management, increasing biodiversity on your property, frogs on farms, dung beetles and biological weed control. 30 sites have also been surveyed for flora and fauna (see the results on pages 2-3 of this newsletter). We also have a workshop on pasture cropping and ecological agriculture coming up, on Wednesday 30th April (see the front page of this newsletter for more information). All community members are welcome to attend this free event.

Weed and integrated pest management trials

There are a number of research trials being run in conjunction with the CPP project, to provide land holders with valuable, locally relevant results of new ideas being researched. We are currently hoping to establish trials examining the ability of native species to suppress invasive weeds in the Humula and Kyeamba Valley areas. The trials can only be established under suitable seasonal conditions, so more information will be available as the year progresses.

Another weed trial was planted at a roadside site at Marrar in spring 2013. This trial aims to investigate the competitive effects of a range of native grasses, shrubs and forbs on the weed flora of the site. The trials are also looking at:

- The effects of varying rates of sugar on the establishment of *Microlaena stipoides* and *Hardenbergia violacea* (sugar stimulates microbial activity, depleting soil nitrogen and potentially conferring a competitive advantage on native species adapted to low soil fertility)
- The effects of mycorrhizal fungi on the establishment and growth rate of *Acacia cultriformis* (mycorrhizal fungi may increase the nutrient-uptake abilities of the host plant and increase its competitive ability).

An integrated pest management trial is also being conducted, on six properties around Illabo/Bethungra. This trial aims to reduce pest outbreaks in crops and

pastures by encouraging beneficial insects through the re-establishment of native vegetation. Plant species were selected to provide year-round flowering, so that insect populations could be sustained even at unfavourable times of the year. Species include: *Acacia pycnantha*, *A. paradoxa*, *A. cardiophylla*, *A. lanigera*, *A. genistifolia*, *A. montana*, *A. buxifolia*, *Cassinia longifolia*, *Indigofera australis*, *Eutaxia microphylla*, *Hardenbergia violacea*, *Senna barclayana* and several small forbs. The experiment is expected to run for several years.

Wildlife cameras in action

Remote wildlife cameras, or "spy cameras" as children often like to call them, are now available to borrow from Murrumbidgee Landcare. The cameras were purchased as part of the CPP project and can be used to remotely monitor the presence and behaviour of animals in our environment.

The infra-red cameras are simply set up in a location of interest with some bait, and left undisturbed for a number of days. The camera will automatically take photographs of any animal which comes to investigate the bait. The camera can then be collected, all photos downloaded to a computer and the species identified.



Above: An image captured using a remote wildlife camera on a property near Junee

The image above was captured by one of our CPP project land holders in early March at a property east of Junee. The bird is either a mature Brown Goshawk (*Accipiter fasciatus*) or a male Collared Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter cirrhocephalus*) - both are widely distributed across Australia. These species feed on introduced birds such as sparrows and common starlings as well as small mammals. Rabbits are a particularly important prey item, as well as reptiles and insects.

If you are interested in finding out what is roaming around your property and would like to borrow one of our cameras please contact Nicole Maher on 0487 953 776 or Jacinta Christie on 0431 953 778.

Creating a healthy farm dam

Alison Elvin, Natural Capital

Is your farm dam just a hole in the ground storing stock drinking water of dubious quality? Many farm dams are like this: the banks are bare, eroded and trampled. There are few aquatic plants and animals. There is no buffering vegetation to slow, filter and spread the polluted storm water that rushes across the paddocks into the dam. Where stock walk along the water's edge, the eroded sediment and animal manure further contaminates the water. Without shade, the water becomes uncomfortably warm in summer, and with little dissolved oxygen, it can brew up many disease-causing microorganisms.

While the water keeps stock alive, it has been estimated that the live weight of stock reduces by as much as 20% when they drink poor quality water, and their overall health similarly deteriorates. Improving the health of your dam will boost your farm business and local biodiversity.

How can a healthy farm dam be created from such a typical dam?

The key to cleaning the water and renewing biodiversity is vegetation cover - a dense cover of tussock-shaped grasses across the inflow area and throughout the buffer zone, with reeds and rushes and other water plants at the water's edge, clumps of shrubs and trees scattered around the riparian zone, and habitat logs and rocks both in and out of the water.

To achieve this, the biggest single cost will be to exclude your stock while the vegetation establishes. This can be achieved by fencing out the entire dam, its in-flow and the surrounding riparian edges. This will also require the cost of providing alternative stock water with troughs, pumps and piping. Alternatively, you could fence out the dam but leave a relatively narrow walkway access into one small section of the water, stabilized with rocks or logs to prevent erosion from stock trampling the edges.

If you practice rotational grazing regimes, with stock grazing a paddock for a few days or weeks a year, you may not need to fence out the dam, providing appropriate vegetation cover establishes. Once the protective vegetation is established - which typically takes about three years - the dam area can then become another source of feed, especially suited to crash grazing when required.

What does the vegetation do to the water flowing into the dam?

The vegetation slows and filters the in-flowing water, causing it to drop some of its sediment and attached pollutants. The improved water quality reduces animal diseases and boosts their growth. Slowed run-off water also begins to percolate into the soil, providing sub-surface moisture into the pasture and increasing resilience to drought. In addition, vegetation, logs, rocks



and pebbles all increase available habitat and create microclimates. This encourages many native species to live in and around your dam - you will start to see birds, insects, frogs, yabbies, fish, tortoises, reptiles and mammals making use of the water and habitat provided by your healthy farm dam.

What plants belong where?

All dams have a series of recognisable 'zones'. The outermost zone is the **catchment zone** - this is usually the surrounding paddock. Reducing over-grazing in the paddock allows rainfall to percolate into the soil before running off, which reduces the amount of sediment, manure and chemicals running into the dam.

Around the dam, up to 30 metres or more from the high-water mark, is the **buffer zone**, or riparian edge, which includes both the inflow and outflow areas. Dense sedge, pin rush and grass cover including ground-hugging species such as couch grass are critical in this zone to reduce erosion and compaction, provide habitat, increase soil moisture and slow and filter water flows. You can also plant clumps of trees and shrubs through the grasses and sedges, with the tallest-growing species planted to the northwest to reduce evaporation from summer winds. Species can include eucalypts, wattles, bottlebrush, tea-trees, paperbarks, banksias, bursaria and other prickly shrubs, and many forbs such as lomandra. Revegetate so you can slash or spray weeds without damaging your desirable plants. Standing and fallen trees with hollows will provide additional habitat.

The **batter zone** lies between the high- and low-water mark, where wind-blown water can erode the water's edge without protective vegetation. The water in this zone is shallow, warmer and often nutrient-rich, supporting a wide diversity of sedges, rushes and reeds. Each species will grow in different depths of water, and perform remarkable water-cleansing roles. They also provide critical breeding, nesting, feeding, sheltering and perching habitat for aquatic life, from insects to frogs and fish. Often, these plants begin to appear naturally within weeks or

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months of stock exclusion, then wax and wane in density depending on the seasons. Be sure to avoid native species such as bulrush, that can become invasive in water less than 2 metres.

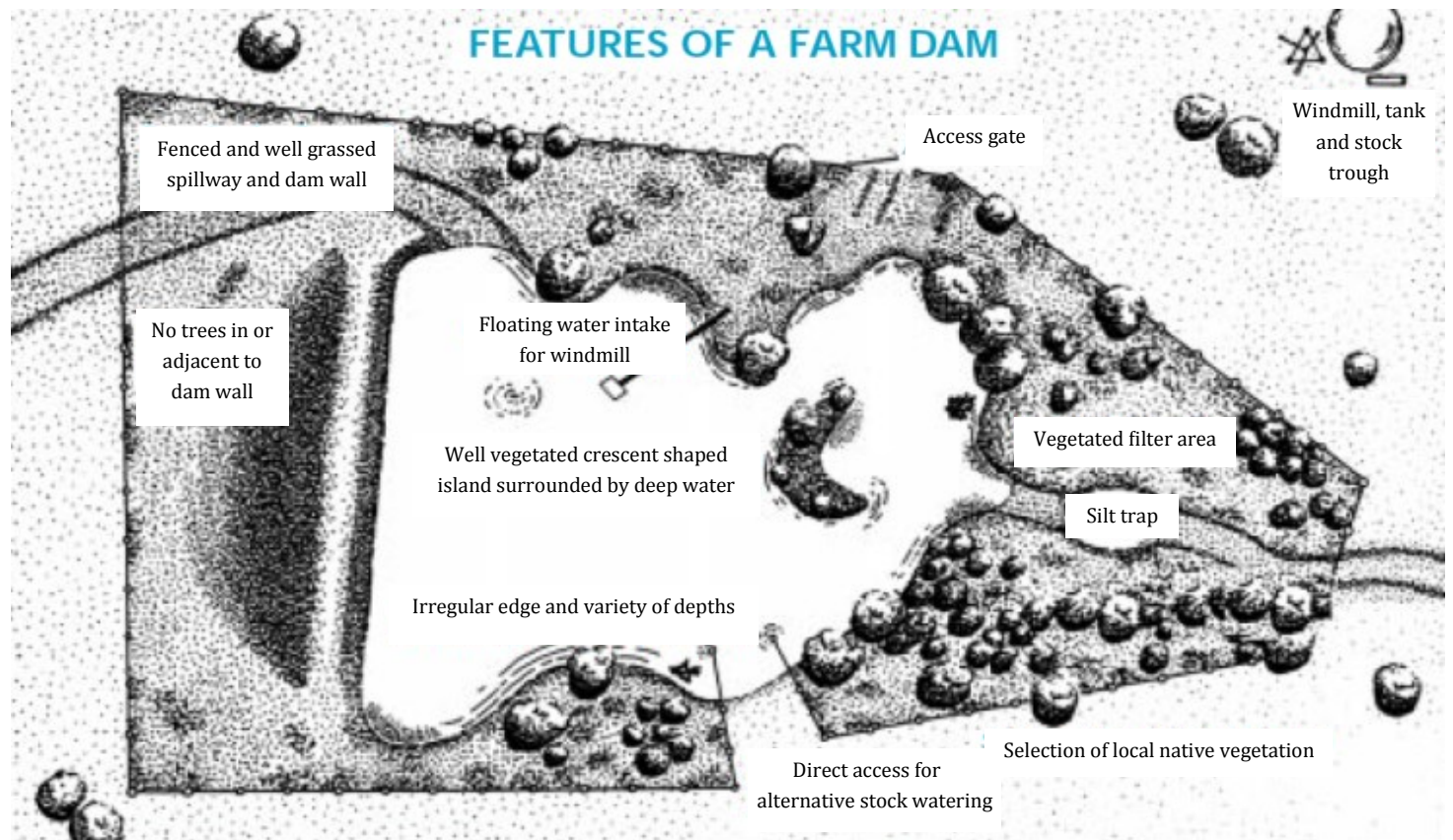
To further increase the habitat value of the batter zone, and ensure the water's edge has a variable margin, you can add clumps of rocks and logs here and there around the dam - you'll be surprised how quickly life returns to these spots!

Permanent water is the final zone. The greater the variety of width and depth in this zone, the greater the diversity of aquatic life. Adding fallen logs into the dam itself will offer

shelter, nesting and breeding sites for many aquatic species, including fish. Farmers have found that many of the plants that live exclusively in the body of water will just appear in and around their dams once the stock pressure has been removed and the habitat increased.

You often don't need to do too much more to have a healthy, vibrant farm dam, but the results can be amazing!

For more information on creating a healthy farm dam, or to request an information pack, contact Nicole Maher: nmaher@mli.org.au, or 0487 953 776.



Above: A picture showing many of the important features of a healthy farm dam (image courtesy of the Mount Lofty Ranges Catchment Management Program and the SA Environment Protection Agency)

National Landcare webinar series

Landcare Australia have developed a new way to share interesting Landcare and related stories from around the country - free online webinars! Webinars are presentations which you can view online from your home computer. If you watch a webinar live, it is interactive, meaning you can ask questions and make comments to the presenter as the presentation is taking place. Once the live presentation is over, anyone can watch a recording of the presentation at any time.

Some of the recent Landcare webinars include "Holistic

management" with Allan Savory, and "Regenerating Australia's soil health" with a range of speakers including David Marsh and Michael Jeffery. To watch any of the Landcare webinars, visit the Landcare Australia website at: www.landcareonline.com.au/?page_id=10479.

You can also subscribe to Landcare Australia's electronic newsletter, to receive notification of upcoming Landcare webinars and other events, at: www.landcareonline.com.au/about/the-national-landcare-facilitator/nlf-e-newsletter/.

Coming events

Tarcutta Valley Landcare Group meetings

All community members are welcome to attend our monthly Landcare group meetings. Dates, times and locations for our autumn meetings are:

- Wednesday 26th March, from 7.30 pm at Humula Sports Club
- Tuesday 15th April, from 7.00 pm at Tarcutta RSL (note the earlier starting time, due to the end of daylight savings)
- Tuesday 20th May, from 7.00 pm at Tarcutta RSL

Pasture cropping and ecological agriculture workshop

Wednesday 30th April, 9.00 am to 12.30 pm The morning session will be at the Humula Sports Club, followed by a local property site visit for those who are interested (finishing around 3.00 pm). Come along to learn about some exciting alternatives to conventional grazing practices! The workshop is free for all community members, with morning tea and lunch provided. Please RSVP by Tuesday 22nd April to Nicole Maher (Murrumbidgee Landcare): 0487 953 776 or nmaher@mli.org.au.

Creek to Reservoir Landcare walk

(Date to be confirmed). All community members are invited to join our Landcare group on a walk along the Creek to Reservoir walking trail. The walk will take a maximum of 1 hour, and we will have a local expert along to identify the plant species we see and point out other points of interest. For more information, contact Jenny Cowie (Tarcutta Landcare Secretary): (02) 69 288 238.

Biological control of blackberry field day

(Date to be confirmed). Barry Sampson of 'Weedbiocontrol' will run this field day at Tumbarumba, to allow people to see the results of the blackberry rust, learn how to inoculate, and identify the symptoms to look for. The rust will also be available for purchase. For more information, or to register your interest, please contact Nicole Maher: nmaher@mli.org.au, or 0487 953 776.

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If you have any questions or comments about this newsletter, or would like to contribute any ideas, please contact Nicole Maher (Newsletter Editor):

nmaher@mli.org.au, or 0487 953 776.

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