



The **future** keepers

MANY OF AUSTRALIA'S PROGRESSIVE FARMERS ARE JOINING A WHOLE-OF-FARM CERTIFICATION PROGRAM, WHICH RECOGNISES LANDHOLDERS WHO CONTINUALLY IMPROVE THEIR ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT.

STORY + PHOTOS **PAUL MYERS**

“Embrace the environmental opportunity,” urges Australian Land Management Group founder Tony Gleeson, pictured at the Adelaide Central Market.

THEY AREN'T leftist Greenies or outspoken environmental activists. Rather than being driven by blind idealism, they simply want to manage their properties responsibly and sustainably, while maximising productivity, shoring up market access for their products and guaranteeing longevity for future custodians of their land. They are, so far, small in number, but include some of Australia's best and most progressive farmers. And, although unrecognised by government or farm organisations, their influence is growing.

They're Australia's emerging farm eco-warriors, who are quietly but assuredly demonstrating what successful, environmentally sustainable food- and fibre-producing landholdings will look like in the future.

The key is an independent, whole-of-farm environmental certification scheme – unique in Australia – that meets the international environmental management standard and which recognises farmers who show continual improvement. Operated by the not-for-profit Australian Land Management Group (ALMG), its fledgling army of some 150 rural producers across the country is receiving moral and financial support from major rural companies and organisations, and high-profile individuals here and overseas.

Northern New South Wales beef producer Tony Gleeson, a former advisor to Hawke government primary industries minister John Kerin, launched ALMG with like-minded producers in 2003. Seven years later – and with the backing of bodies including Landcare Australia and Australian Wool Innovation, companies with the market power of Elders, The Merino Company and Japanese wool processor and retailer Onward Kashiyama, and individuals such as Queensland Governor Penny Wensley – the group's certification system (ALMCS) is setting the standard in this new arena.

Tony says that rather than hoping criticism of current farming practices will go away, farmers need to “embrace the environmental opportunity” and strengthen links between land use and the environment. By doing so, he says, participants will be rewarded while building skills and motivation, developing creativity and strengthening interpersonal connections.

Rather than imposing requirements, participants in the program identify their own priorities, putting them, as Tony says, “in the box seat” to manage improved environmental outcomes.

“The move is definitely on for land-management certification,” says Jock Douglas, a founding ALMG member who produces cattle and desert limes with his wife on “Wyoming”, near Roma, Queensland. “It isn't a case of making landholders do it, but of them wanting to,” he says. “As natural-resource managers, our challenge is to meet the expectations for improved environmental management while capturing public recognition and achieving market benefits.”

T.V. Fairfax Pastoral Company, which operates seven cattle properties over 92,000 hectares in Queensland, joined the program last year, as has the major wheat, cotton and sheep producer, Clyde Agriculture. “We're deadly serious about our environmental responsibilities,” says T.V. Fairfax's general manager, Greg Robertson. “We believe there'll be economic benefits down the track, but the main reason we joined is because we believe that, eventually, we will be made to do it.”

UP CLOSE



Michael Evans, of “Wootoona”, near Angaston, SA, has extensively subdivided his property for greater productivity without compromising sustainability.



Mt Pleasant, SA, woolgrower Maurice Collins shows a fleece from his clip to Japanese retailer Hikosaburo Seike.

Mark Geraghty, the marketing manager of Adelaide-based pastoral house, Elders Limited, which indirectly supports the program through an Elders-Landcare project, agrees. “Within 10 years it will be essential to have a certified environmental-management system. Whoever is first to provide a solution will have a major market advantage,” he says. “We are giving ALMCS support to see where it goes.”

Elders makes the certification system available to clients through its field agronomists. “We don’t push it, but we are finding that our larger clients are searching for solutions that will give them a marketing edge through price premiums or market access – or both,” Mark says.

Independent economist Selwyn Heilbron also believes land and product certification will be a key marketing tool in the future. He says foods with verifiable environmental attributes are moving from niche to mainstream markets, and cites the use by Nespresso and McDonald’s of Rainforest Alliance-certified coffee, and US retailing giant Wal-Mart’s environmental product-indexing system as examples of major changes now occurring in the food-supply chain. “There will be opportunities to secure preferred supplier status on the basis of demonstrated improvements in environmental outcomes,” he says.

So far, the market benefits for products from certified properties are small or non-existent, which concerns some participants who want immediate rewards. The Merino Company, a Melbourne-based wool business that assists growers in Australia and South Africa to maximise marketing opportunities, pays a three percent price premium for wool from ALMCS properties.

After a year’s involvement, The Merino Company says participation in its pools from certified woolgrowers is gaining momentum. “There is a growing focus on sustainability among retailers, apparel and textile customers,” spokeswoman Felicity McDonald says.

Japanese wool retailer and processor Onward Kashiyama has gone ▶

PUTTING CERTIFICATION INTO PRACTICE

To neighbours and others who know her, South Australian livestock producer and boutique grape grower Sue Holt doesn't need to prove that the two properties she operates with her husband John and sons David and Andrew are managed in an environmentally responsible way. Last year she won the Environmental Management System Association's national landholder award – the nation's highest recognition for land stewardship.

But Sue wanted independent verification of the family's farming practices to know their land will sustain her descendants, just as it has supported five generations of her family since 1860.

"We wanted certification for self-satisfaction and recognition ahead of hoping to achieve any marketing advantage," she says. "But we also knew that if we didn't get certification and had to in the future, we would be a long way behind."

ALMG members for the past six years, and with two independent audits under their belts, the Holts know what works on "Burnbrae", their 400-hectare home property that has productive wine grapevines dating back to 1880, and on "Poonawatta", operated by son David and his wife, Michelle.

Nevertheless, she acknowledges that being in the ALMG certification system has enabled the family to manage the farm better. Dividing the property into smaller paddocks, fencing off remnant vegetation, creeks, dams and waterholes, creating laneways and shelterbelts for livestock and native animals, and monitoring plant and bird species have become standard practices.

"This has helped us become more observant of how the farm works," Sue says. "We can renovate small areas more easily. We have tried dry sowing into clover and grasses and have experimented with organic fertilisers. We had 170 sheep in one renovated paddock, and you would hardly know they had been in there."

A few kilometres away, Michael Evans and his wife Jane are the sixth generation of the Evans family on "Wootoona", a 2100ha sheep and cattle property they are seeking to make as productive as possible, without compromising sustainability.

Michael became an ALMG member after completing a Resource Consulting Services course in 2000/01. "This process enabled us to analyse our business and understand what its profit drivers were," he says. "We concluded that it was a lazy business with overheads that were too high. So we set out to make it more productive and run more stock. We fenced off creeks and dams, which enabled increased subdivision and, as a result, a higher density of stocking on paddocks with long rest periods. With 32 paddocks managed in rotation, and 120 days' rest on our lower block, we are now much more in control than when the property operated on a set stocking basis."

Michael says the continual improvement criteria required for ALMCS is "something we should be doing anyway". "We wanted to improve our asset and be better land managers," he says. "While there hasn't yet been any financial benefit, there is a potential marketing opportunity by being part of this system. Look at how McDonald's is



Winner of last year's national farm environment award, Sue Holt, of Eden Valley, SA.

marketing the McAngus burger. That's just a start. I think there is going to be a lot more of these associations in the future."

Near Mitchell in central Queensland, neighbours Grant Maudsley and Bill Douglas are also keen advocates of land certification. Grant, who runs the cattle and wheat-growing property "Nalpa Downs" that he and wife Jane bought in 1995, is the cattle chairman of Queensland primary producer organisation AgForce. Like many ALMG members, the Maudsleys were introduced through their involvement in Landcare. Although AgForce and other farm bodies have yet to endorse environmental certification, Grant remains enthusiastic that the system can deliver financial benefits. "We wanted to demonstrate change objectives and positive management of the environment," Grant says. "I wouldn't describe us as Greenies, but we could see things happening that we didn't want." Such as changes in the composition of native pasture species and an increase in the number of kangaroos on the Mitchell grass downs property where they produce beef and wheat.

The Maudsleys have yet to be audited and are recording key activities through myEMS, the computer program landholders use to develop their environmental plan. Since joining ALMG they have worked on erosion control, rotated paddocks, monitored native grasses, created contour banks and sought to better balance their 800–900 cattle and kangaroo populations.

"We believe we can restore the balance by ensuring kangaroos return to their natural water sources," Grant says. "You just have to have good fences. Reducing the stocking rate isn't necessarily the answer. Here, it's possible to have a block with less grass and the same number of stock. It depends on having an even amount of ground cover. This is what pushed us to rotational grazing, which helps achieve the right pasture mix."

Grant says that a major attraction of certification is the opportunity to "control our own destiny". "It allows us to get on the front foot," he says. "If we don't do it, we run the risk of being run over by government regulation."

Next door, Bill Douglas and his wife

Cecily, son Rowan and his wife run cattle on "Mt Lonsdale", a brigalow block that Bill's father bought in 1946. Blade ploughing, subdivision and astute native-grass management have enabled them to improve carrying capacity on the 8146ha property, as well as on "Aqua Downs" a 24,000ha property they own near Morven.

With 18km of dingo fence on the home property, they also face problems with kangaroos, which place extra grazing pressure on available feed from buffalo and Mitchell grasses. "Kangaroos are as big a problem here now as rabbits were in the 1930s," Bill says. "We face particularly tough grazing pressure because of the way the 'roos graze – the grass is always short. But we believe we can run a sustainable grazing enterprise in harmony with the natural environment, and maintain this for generations to come."

The property, which has been certified, is fenced according to land types into 200ha paddocks, which means cattle have to walk no further than a kilometre to water. Cattle are moved every couple of weeks during the growing season.

Rowan says he would like to see all paddocks growing grass, but there's some 3000ha of blade ploughing still to be done on the two properties to achieve this outcome.

Bill is a firm believer in the adage that producers have to stand behind what they sell. The key to this, he maintains, is keeping his country healthy. "Healthy land means healthy livestock and, hopefully, healthy profits," he says.



Grant and Jane Maudsley, who want to balance kangaroos and cattle on "Nalpa Downs" near Mitchell, Qld.



Bill Douglas (right), owner of “Mt Lonsdale”, near Mitchell, Qld, with his son Rowan at a cattle water trough on their 8146ha brigalow block.

HOW THE SYSTEM WORKS

The Australian Land Management Certification System (ALMCS) is a whole-of-farm, catchment-linked, externally audited, continuous improvement environmental-management system that complies with the ISO14001 international environmental management standard.

Landholders initially attend a free information session of about two hours’ duration where all aspects of the program, including the myEMS computer program, are explained. They then attend a two-day workshop in a regional area to develop an individual management plan. Activities that have an environmental impact are identified, a risk assessment is undertaken and a plan developed to address the highest priority impacts.

Three to six months later, and thereafter annually, members attend a one-and-a-half-day implementation workshop, partly on-farm and in a computer workshop venue. This refines and monitors implementation of the plan and coincides with external auditing of compliance against ALMG’s certification standards.

Subject to certain conditions, the federally funded Farm Ready program meets the cost of workshops. For most landholders the only cash cost is a certification fee, starting at \$200, which is graded according to the gross value of production from the property for which the certification applies.

For more information contact Julia Telford on 0427 580 399, email Julia.Telford@almg.org.au or go to www.almg.org.au.

a step further, and has promoted apparel made from sustainably produced wool. Last year it donated \$160,000 to fund ALMG’s program development and its general manager of product development and marketing, Hikosaburo Seike, visited South Australia to meet woolgrower members and observe their management practices.

Australian Wool Innovation’s manager of supply-chain integrity in Shanghai, Ben Lyons, who was “converted” after attending an ALMCS workshop in Armidale, NSW, two years ago, sees environmental certification of Australian farms and their products as an essential ingredient for future marketing advantage. “It isn’t good enough to simply say, ‘We’re green,’” he says. “Wool already has a high level of integrity for sustainability, but we have to do more. Australian wool already attracts a price premium of \$1–\$3 a kilogram over other suppliers, so we have to do everything we can to maintain our advantage. The Japanese, in particular, love the concept of environmental certification and a holistic approach. It’s a trend that is definitely going to grow.”

Landcare’s partnerships manager, Shane Norris, says certification offers formal recognition of natural-resources protection. “It’s a part of the ethos of Landcare and is very complementary to our activities,” he says. “We actively encourage participation to our farming members, although we haven’t been blown away by the response.”

Tony Gleeson acknowledges there is a long way to go before a standardised farm-certification system is widely adopted – whether ALMCS or something else. “But a large percentage of farmers want to do the right thing and there are many on-farm and external benefits from doing so,” he says.

Queensland Governor Penny Wensley, who was Australian Ambassador for the Environment at the United Nations from 1992 until 1996, hosted a breakfast meeting of ALMG’s Queensland members recently. She believes the current trend to environmental certification of farms is just the beginning. “There is a need for greater sophistication in marketing farm products,” she says. “I believe this type of program will eventually be the benchmark.” 