

PARTNERSHIPS WITH CORPORATE SPONSORS - A LANDCARE GROUP'S PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects, from a landholder perspective, on a five year partnership between the Woody Yaloak Catchment Group in south west Victoria and Alcoa of Australia Ltd. In Victoria's first farmer led, privately sponsored catchment project. Catchment land is degraded by salinity, soil erosion, rabbits, foxes, furze and poor pasture species e.g. bent grass. Since 1993 practices known to reduce the degradation and lift productivity have become more widely adopted.

The paper discusses why the corporate partnership has benefited our farming business, describes 'on-ground' achievements and less tangible, equally important, aspects of community development.

BACKGROUND

Woody Yaloak encompasses seven landcare groups and more than 220 full time and part time farmers. The 120 000ha catchment in south west Victoria is degraded by salinity, soil erosion, rabbits, foxes, furze and the invasion of less productive pastures species e.g. bent grass. Farms in the Woody Yaloak catchment produce more than \$21m./y. from wool, beef, prime lambs and cropping. The project started in April 1993 after 12 months planning.

The partnership with a large corporation has been a vital component in the success of the Woody Yaloak project. Alcoa of Australia Ltd has been our major supporter and during the past four years contributed more than \$450 000 to 'on-ground' works, communications and publicity. We have many smaller sponsorships which total nearly \$40 000, from fertiliser, seed and chemical companies; soil testing laboratories; and merchandise stores.

We were fortunate to have a corporate sponsor wanting to support a catchment based project. In 1992 most of the groups in the catchment were becoming less enthusiastic about landcare. The primary avenue for support was from Government agencies but was not meeting the landcare groups' needs. Support was highly prescriptive (i.e. it was limited to specific activities and landholders were only eligible if they met certain criteria) and focused on conservation. It did not embrace the farmer's need to increase productivity as a way of funding ongoing conservation work.

Rumours of a sponsor and the facilitation activities from non-government organisations such as the Victorian Farmers' Federation and Greening Australia (Victoria) renewed our enthusiasm in landcare. We were also fortunate the sponsor did not impose many 'boundaries' around the ideas that could be supported. The only restriction was that it had to be farmer led and encompass a significant river catchment. Detailed planning was undertaken with a backdrop of likely support for implementation. This positive atmosphere allowed landholders to suggest exactly what they felt needed to be done and how it should be supported. In some cases this was in direct contrast to the policy and approach of the State Government agencies.

WHY A CORPORATE PARTNERSHIP HAS BEEN GOOD FOR BUSINESS

The corporate partnership has been good for our farming business. From an activity point of view we have seen: 50% increase in tree planting, equating to an additional 50,000 trees/y.; 25% increase in pasture sowing each year, estimated to have boosted net returns by \$185 000/y.; an integrated rabbit and fox control program, resulting in more than 150 000 rabbits killed and a 90% reduction in the fox population; significant adoption of pasture manipulation techniques; and a doubling in the number of farm plans.

These activities are increasing individual property productivity and importantly preserving and improving the productive base of our farming system.

Yet there are other, less tangible but equally important changes in the catchment which are vital to our farming business.

Firstly the sponsorship from Alcoa and other supporters has helped the individual develop confidence and the commitment to undertake regular landcare works. Pastures, trees, vermin and weed control are no longer seen as discretionary. They are mainstream, included every year in the farm program just like shearing or applying fertiliser. Over the past four years activity has risen while the contribution from the community compared to the sponsors has increased from half to more than three quarters of the cost.

It has helped strengthen the sense of community. Alcoa's sponsorship came during a period of depressed commodity prices and closures of schools and banks in local towns. This catchment project became a positive activity, uniting the community and establishing the foundation for the ongoing success of landcare.

We have seen individuals become more willing to share information about their own farm situation and the successes and failures of various 'possible solutions' they have tried. There has been a growing recognition that most of the expertise to solve these problem lies with the landholders in the community rather than outside it. Also it has strengthened the belief in the mutual benefit that can be gained from having neighbours adopting sound practices that keeps individual farms viable and enhances the overall resource base.

We have also learned a great deal about dealing with sponsors through our partnership with Alcoa. As a partner in a sponsorship deal, we need to understand the other partner's needs and expectations, how they want the relationship to be promoted and where things might go in the future. An understanding of these principles has recently led to a partnership with Wesfarmers Dalgety who are contributing \$10,000 to the project this year.

This project has encouraged more people in the catchment to participate in landcare (active involvement now stands at 70% up from 20% in 1992).

The last point is arguably the most vital to staying in business. We see participation as the key to achieving sustainability in the catchment because it is the landholders who have to fund and implement the changes. There simply isn't enough money from 'outsiders' to support all that needs to be done. If we don't have each individual having the 'commitment' and 'capacity' (i.e. finances, skills) to undertake the activities we will never achieve the result we need.