

Neighbourhood Groups – connecting farmers to each other and their landscape.

The Woody Yaloak Catchment

The Woody Yaloak River catchment is located near Ballarat, in south west Victoria. The river flows from the outskirts of Ballarat, south to Lake Corangamite, near Colac. Lake Corangamite is a RAMSAR wetland.

The catchment encompasses approximately 120,000 ha of land, and is home to more than 200 commercial farms. The catchment also has a large population of small lifestyle block owners. These small properties are concentrated around townships and within easy commuting distance to Ballarat. There is also about 20,000 ha of public land, mainly as State forest.

Most of the agriculture enterprises in the catchment are grazing based, predominantly sheep, with an increasing cropping component. The commercial timber industry also has a presence in the area.

The Woody Yaloak Catchment Project

In 1992, the Pittong-Hoyles Creek, Werneth, Rokewood and Misery Moonlight landcare groups joined forces, establishing a catchment based landcare network called the Woody Yaloak Catchment Group (WYCG). Together they developed a plan to accelerate the adoption of on-farm landcare solutions. Right from the beginning the group had a strong focus on productivity, hence the motto: 'productive catchment management'.

Greening Australia, the Victorian Farmers Federation and the Department of Agriculture helped the community to identify its issues and develop a plan of action. The group developed a five year plan focused on reducing the levels of salt and silt discharging from the Woody Yaloak River. The plan involved erosion control, rabbit control, tree planting and establishing deep rooted perennial pastures.

With the plan in place, the Victorian Farmers Federation then assisted the group to broker an investment deal with Alcoa World Alumina Australia. A partnership was established and landholders enthusiastically embraced the concept, undertaking significant amounts of on-ground work.

The structure and function of the Woody Yaloak Project has evolved over time, constantly changing and adapting to maintain its relevance to the community and meet the challenges presented by the political and social climate.

Committee structure and function

The WYCG is an umbrella structure which enables representation from the seven landcare groups and key stakeholders in the catchment. Each landcare group elects one or two representatives, depending on the group's size, to sit on the Woody Yaloak Catchment Project Executive. The Executive

also has positions available for representation from Alcoa, the Corangamite Catchment Management Authority and the Department of Primary Industries.

The executive committee currently employs four part time staff (1.1 full time equivalents): Project Manager, Neighbourhood Group Facilitator, Neighbourhood Group GIS Officer and Treasurer/Accounts person.

The Woody Yaloak Catchment Project executive committee perform three major functions. The first is to act as a funding broker, attracting funding from a range of sources to support on-ground productivity and landcare projects. The second is to record and communicate the Group's achievements to supporters and stakeholders. The third is to help individual farmers and local groups plan, implement and review their landcare and production activities.

To perform these functions, the Executive Committee created five portfolio areas: Finance, Communications and Publicity, On-ground Works, Strategic Partnerships and Productivity. The concept of portfolio groups was introduced to streamline the business and focus each member's particular areas of expertise, skill and interests.

Neighbourhood Groups form another layer in the framework. Neighbourhood Groups are small, localised groups of landholders focused on achieving local landscape outcomes. Each landcare group will have a number Neighbourhood Group within its working area. All Neighbourhood Group members must be also be financial members of their local landcare group and the Woody Yaloak Project.

JEN, Would a diagram help that shows the structure and interrelationship?

Each landcare group has a small membership fee, of the order \$10-\$25, to support their administrative commitments. The Woody Yaloak Catchment Project has a levy of 11cents/ha for large properties or a set fee of \$27.50 for properties less than 250 ha. Historically the levy was implemented to assist in funding the project coordinator position. Coordinator funding is now provided by other means. However, the levy has been retained as a valuable pool of non-targeted funding, which is used to support projects and activities than do not fit within the guidelines presented by the other funding bodies.

The Evolution of Neighbourhood Groups

In the early years of the Woody Yaloak Catchment Project, on-ground works were undertaken as individual landholder projects. Landholders consulted with the project coordinator and developed plans for works on their land: erosion control, rabbit control, tree planting and perennial pasture establishment. This approach was successful and resulted in a high participation of farmers in the catchment. The project coordinator was the lynch pin, the thread that held it all together and the means by which successful projects were promoted across the catchment.

After six successful years, circumstances changed. The availability of funding had begun to decline, particularly with respect to support for the coordinator position. In Landcare circles, people were starting to talk more about catchment communities and ways of involving all residents of the catchment, rather than simply focusing on the large landholders/farmers. There was also a challenge to encourage the sharing of knowledge and experiences between landholders. The Woody Yaloak Group identified that a change was needed to make the project more inclusive, to motivate landholders and spark further activity.

At that time, Ted Rowley, who was Alcoa's landcare advisor, challenged members of the Woody Yaloak Executive to think about how landholders could be encouraged to work together and share more of their knowledge and ideas. Ted raised the notion of sub-catchment groups, a model that had been successfully adopted in Western Australia.

After much discussion and debate, and a study tour to Western Australia, the Woody Yaloak Neighbourhood Group process was born. The first Neighbourhood Groups formed 1998/99.

How Neighbourhood Groups Operate – the process

The intent of neighbourhood groups was to get local landholders working in small groups with like minded people. The group minimum size was two people, with a preference for groups of six to eight landholders. Ideally direct neighbours would be involved, but it didn't necessarily have to be that way. As long as landholders were willing to talk to each other and work together, with a common purpose or interest they could form a Neighbourhood Group.

The concept was promoted widely throughout the catchment and landholders were responsible for forming their own groups. There was no 'cold-calling' by Woody Yaloak staff. Landholders were encouraged to take the initiative, talk to their neighbours and then come to the Woody Yaloak Catchment Group with their ideas.

To support the landholder driven interest, the roles of the staff off the Woody Yaloak Catchment Group were changed. A position of neighbourhood group facilitator was created, with the main responsibility to help new groups develop their ideas into long term plans. An additional position of Geographic Information System (GIS) officer was created, so there was immediate access to electronic maps, land features and relevant survey data such as vegetation and waterways condition maps. It also allows completed projects to be registered on the GIS, so landholders can see progress with their group activities.

Within a few months, a number of groups had sprung up across the catchment, relying on the motivation of at least two landholders to start the process. The same format is still used today.

When a new group forms, they meet with the neighbourhood group facilitator to discuss their ideas and potential plans. Generally a group will come together with a single issue or interest in mind, such as tree planting or weed control. The discussion is broadened with questions such as “how would you like to see your landscape change over the next three to five years?” Inevitably there are a range of things that landholders would like to see change in their landscape. So, what may have started out as a discussion about weed control, quickly broadens to include revegetation activities, waterway health, erosion control, productivity issues and the like. Groups are encouraged to be innovative in their approach to problems, and specialist technical advice is sought as required. Jen, Maybe just a couple of examples eg MM – to get the creeks back to pre gold mining days etc

For example the Mt Mercer Neighbourhood Group began their activities in 1999, with a productivity focus. The key issue for the group at that time was increasing winter feed availability for their stock. The group discussed a range of options for achieving this goal, and then each member selected a method to trial on their property. Trials included drainage to reduce waterlogging, use of winter active pasture species, nitrogen application and winter active fodder crops. The group followed the progress of each individual trial; the results shared and widely discussed. From this initial productivity focus, the group has gone on to incorporate other activities such as creekline fencing and revegetation, the establishment of tree belts for shelter and habitat, erosion control and salinity discharge management.

Neighbourhood Groups are encouraged to formulate a three to five year plan, detailing the projects that they would like to work on to improve their local landscape. This plan is essential for two reasons. Firstly, it gives the group a frame of reference, a plan of action and an achievable goal to work toward. Secondly, the plan gives the Executive Committee a critical insight into community priorities and funding requirements for the future. This information drives many of the strategic management decisions taken in the Woody Yaloak Catchment Project.

Neighbourhood group planning is not about creating whole farm plans

The planning process has elements that are similar to traditional whole farm planning. The model encourages landholders to look at their whole property, to consider different land features such as waterways, patches of vegetation and different soil types. The planning process also requires the identification of changes/improvements and to implement and regularly review their progress.

However, there are also some important differences. Neighbourhood Group plans focus on a local landscape, with landholders encouraged to look beyond their own property boundary and consider the broader environment. The work plans are implemented on individual properties, but are recognised as being part of a larger landscape jigsaw.

The Neighbourhood Group planning process is less formal than traditional whole farm planning and allows plans to evolve and change as group

members' knowledge and skills develop. It is also flexible enough to respond to the changing priorities of landholders as they deal with the challenges presented by climate, markets, bureaucracy and society in general. Groups are encouraged to be innovative, inquiring and to trial new methods of solving landscape problems.

Having established a broad three to five year plan, the group then details their project plans for the next twelve months, specifying types of activities, quantities and funding requirements. The twelve month plan is written up as one to two page group proposal for the consideration of Woody Yaloak Executive Committee. Each project initially scrutinised by a small sub group of the Executive committee, called the On-Ground Works Committee before being recommended to the entire Executive committee for approval. Most members of the on ground works committee are landholders, with additional technical support brought in when needed. This structure creates greater awareness of project proposal by other landholders and allows the proposal to be checked against funding guidelines. This minimises the time the full executive committee spends on project proposals, as many of the likely questions have already been examined and answered. The on ground works committee and the executive committee meet monthly.

Once a project is approved, which usually occurs within a month, the group members are notified. All members of the group receive a copy of the project proposal, and so are fully aware of their own and other members' commitments for the year. The funding is set aside in the budget, and, on completion and inspection of their work, landholders are reimbursed the agreed percentage of the costs incurred. Funding is only guaranteed for one year at a time, but the intention is to continue to support the group throughout the life of the five year plan, funds permitting. With careful forward planning at the Executive committee level to anticipate demand on resources, to date all Neighbourhood Groups have been able to receive on-going funding.

The Neighbourhood Group process is kept as simple as possible, with minimal paperwork and meetings for participants. The focus is very much on getting the job done. The administration, recording, reporting and sourcing of funds is the responsibility of the Executive Committee and staff. Keeping it simple and practical are two of the key ingredients which encourage participation.

Each Neighbourhood Group has an annual planning meeting, where participants review the group's progress, share successes and failures and discuss their plans for the future. The annual project proposal is developed for the year ahead, and the longer term plan is reviewed and revised as required.

JEN would a diagram of some sort showing the planning process help?

Geographic Information Systems

As mentioned pearlier, the Streets Ahead geographic information system is an integral part of the Neighbourhood Group process. The Streets Ahead system was developed by local software developer Osprey Computing, in

association with the WYCG. The software was designed specifically to meet the mapping and data recording needs of the Catchment Group.

The system has an important role to play in the planning process. Aerial photography and data layers, such as roads, hydrology and contours, help groups to visualise their local landscape, the links between different properties and the potential for works plans to fit together.

The WYCG has created its own data layers for capturing project details. Each project is mapped on the GIS and details such as costs, work methods, species planted, quantities, etc. are recorded. These layers help groups to build the picture of their changing landscape. The data collected is used for tracking the progress of the Woody Yaloak Catchment Project and in reporting to stakeholders.

All Catchment Management Authority strategies now contain maps of resource conditions and priorities. These maps are available in digital format which can easily be loaded into Streets Ahead. This facility enables these maps to be viewed at a local level. Landholders can then visualise how their Neighbourhood Group area fits within the broader regional picture and can discuss potential implications and address relevant issues during their group planning.

The GIS is also used to record survey data from the catchment. Woody works closely with Ballarat University and other tertiary institutions and regularly hosts students for work placement. The students collect a wide range of information about natural resources in the catchment. Teams of students have designed surveys and collected data on biodiversity, waterway health, groundwater, salinity discharge and erosion. Ground truthing, site inspection and data collection provides a baseline record of the state of resources. The intention is to repeat these surveys over time to develop an understanding of how the landscape is changing and measure the impact that the on-ground works program is having on the catchment.

Information Sharing Between Neighbourhood Groups

An important part of the Neighbourhood Group process is the exchange of ideas and information between groups. This process is facilitated through Neighbourhood Group gatherings. Each quarter, a landcare group from within the catchment hosts a social gathering, featuring a local neighbourhood group or cluster of neighbourhood groups. The format is generally a meal with an accompanying paddock walk or short presentation by local neighbourhood groups, showcasing works that they have completed or issues of particular interest to the group.

These gatherings are an excellent way of sharing information and raising awareness about projects and issues that are affecting the catchment. The average attendance is of the order 50-60 people per event, with the Christmas gathering attracting up to 100 people. This social interaction is important for fostering and maintaining strong communities.

Neighbourhood Group Achievements

Neighbourhood Groups develop and grow over time. In the early years of Neighbourhood Groups, the numbers of groups grew quickly. Six years on, new groups are still emerging, but at a slower rate. However, more importantly, membership of existing groups is increasing. As groups achieve, neighbours witness the results, hear about the successes and are encouraged to join. When new people come in to a district they are quickly invited to join the local group. Each new member adds an extra piece to the landscape change jigsaw. Currently 70 per cent of the land in the Woody Yaloak catchment is managed by a landholder active in a neighbourhood group.

The graph below (Figure 1) demonstrates the trends in Neighbourhood Group activity. It should be noted that the number of groups fluctuate, over time. Some groups form and continue to remain active over a long period of time. Other groups come together for a few years, achieve their goals and then disband. There are also groups that maintain their identity throughout, but have periods of high activity interspersed with a year(s) where they do not undertake on-ground works, for a variety of reasons.

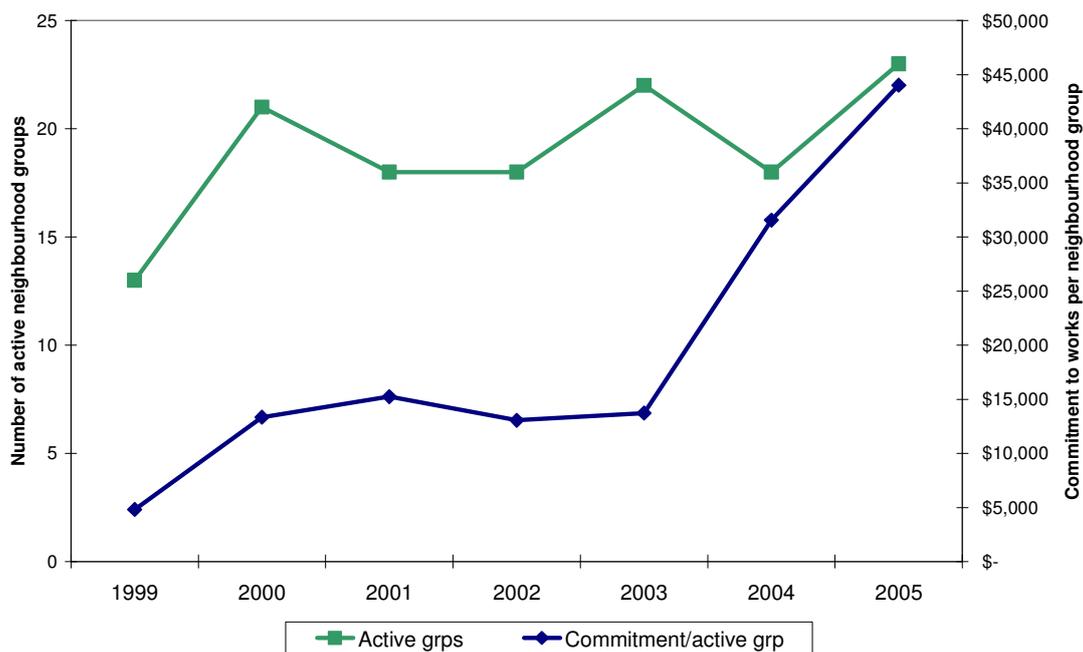


Figure 1: Active neighbourhood groups and the financial commitment of each group

Peer support and learning is very strong within Neighbourhood Groups. A group's collective knowledge and understanding of landscape issues develops over time, through discussion and observation of other landholders' achievements. As groups' confidence, knowledge and skills develop their level of commitment and activity also increases, with members taking on larger and more involved projects. New members joining existing groups has

also contributed to increased activity levels. Figure 1 clearly illustrates this outcome.

The Woody Yaloak Catchment Project recognises that each group is unique and has its own preferred method of operation. The facilitation approach is flexible and simple, with a focus on achieving landscape outcomes and meeting the needs of the community.

Public Land

Neighbourhood Groups have evolved to embrace public land managers and community groups. Parks Victoria, local schools, services groups and sporting clubs have joined existing groups or established their own neighbourhood groups. This inclusive process encourages everyone to take responsibility for their local landscape and work toward shared goals. All members of Neighbourhood Groups are treated equally and are entitled to funding support. The planning and funding distribution process is open and consistent, so there are no secrets, nor preferential treatment.

Pitfalls of the Neighbourhood Group Process

One of the challenges that the Neighbourhood Group process presents is maintaining the identity of Landcare Groups. The establishment of Neighbourhood Groups has led many Landcare Groups in Woody Yaloak Catchment to question their ongoing place and purpose. This is because funding for on-ground projects is being managed at the catchment level and the planning, implementation and review of projects conducted at the Neighbourhood Group level. This has removed two functions previously performed by the Landcare Groups.

For some landcare groups in the Woody Yaloak Catchment this has been a positive development, and are pleased to have been relieved of the administrative burden associated with applying for and managing funds. Some groups are content to meet once a year, in a social setting, to elect a new representative to the Executive committee and conduct any other necessary business by phone. Other groups have taken on a purely social role. One small group merged the local landcare group and neighbourhood group. Another has focused on projects strictly for the public good, on public land, e.g. establishing a walking track along the river. However for some landcare groups, it has challenged their reason for existing.

Why not remove the landcare group layer from the catchment group structure? There are three main reasons. Firstly the historic link – it was the collaborative action of landcare groups that drove the development of the catchment group, and it is from within the landcare groups that members of the Woody Yaloak Executive Committee are elected. Retaining this link ensures that the Executive committee is representative of the different geographic areas. Each landcare group area is unique in terms of its population, major enterprises and environmental issues and it is important

that this diversity is represented at Executive committee level. Secondly, the landcare group is the established the link between the Executive committee and the community and the line through which communication flows. Thirdly, landcare groups operate autonomously and provide a lasting social structure for landcare, which should continue even if the funding climate changed and the network ceased to exist.

The irony is that membership of Landcare Groups has never been higher, because the network requires all Neighbourhood Group participants be registered members of a landcare group.

Why do Neighbourhood Groups Work?

The Neighbourhood Group process is an empowering one. It is all about getting people talking to their neighbours, gaining an increased appreciation of their local landscape and working toward shared goals.

The ingredients which make this a successful process can be summarised as follows:

- Groups are focused on local landscape outcomes – locally relevant and tangible.
- Landholders are able to concentrate most of their effort on implementation, with minimal administrative burden.
- Groups establish their own priorities and goals for their landscape.
- The funding process is based on a simple cost share arrangement, which is easy to calculate and transparent.
- Groups are made up of like minded individuals with common interests and issues.
- All group members are treated equally.
- The administrative turn-around time is quite short. Funding requests can be answered within a month. Similarly, landholders can be reimbursed for their work within a month of completing the job.
- Facilitation is flexible, so the method of operation can be tailored to suit an individual group's needs.