

Wakool Edwards Strong Communities Initiative (WESCI)

Charter and Framework

Background

Wakool Edwards Strong Communities Initiative (WESCI) represents the interests of the Wakool Edwards Region within the former Wakool Shire boundary of the Shire of Murray.

In May to August 2016, the Murray-Darling Basin Authority Initiated Water Community workshops as part of a research project aimed at improving community adaptability to water management changes. The Wakool Shire was selected to take part in this research project as the region was identified as being heavily affected by the water reform process.

At the completion of the final Water Community workshop, community leaders identified the need to form a community organisation to address the impact of structural changes to water policy in the Murray Darling Basin (MDB) and regional characteristics of low population, low rainfall and a high reliance on irrigation for revenue, and WESCI was formed.

The problem can be summarised as:

1. Water is less secure because:

- Secure water entitlements owned by landholders were halved due to water reform in the MDB, further reform could result in even less water entitlements owned by landholders.
- Water availability and price are increasingly volatile.
- Climate is increasingly volatile which fosters further volatility of allocation against Water Entitlements.

2. The Wakool Edwards Community is particularly vulnerable because:

- Irrigated agriculture provides >70% of economic output with only half the number of Water Entitlements owned by landholders than formerly owned.
- A low and declining population risks loss of services and generational loss.
- No major population centres to absorb the shock.
- Farm businesses and support businesses are at risk.

Despite this challenge, the Wakool - Edward region has many positive attributes including, but not limited to:

- Strong, cohesive, vibrant communities, pleasant lifestyle
- Unique natural assets - four healthy rivers, a network of creeks and wetlands, extensive forests, great biodiversity, sunshine, space, wind



- A diverse food production sector - rice, dairy, red meat, wool, avocados, citrus, cereal grain, oilseeds and pulses
- Reasonable proximity to market distribution channels and major cities
- Existing infrastructure for irrigation and community services
- A range of soil types
- A wealth of farm knowledge and expertise in land management and primary production
- Access to water from underground, overland, river systems and irrigation schemes

WESCI was formed to leverage these positive attributes and create a strong and prosperous future for the region by exploring options that may have a transformative impact on the region. Incremental change while encouraged and welcomed, may not be enough to prepare the community for the potential structural changes ahead.

WESCI is in search of big solutions that have a long-lasting impact.

The initial phase operations of WESCI were supported by the Western Murray Land Improvement Group via funding from Murray Local Land Services and the Federal Governments National Landcare Programme. Specifically this funding supported two face to face half day meetings to establish a group charter, identify the desired outcomes to enable “stronger communities” and agreed strategy to achieve those outcomes. An independent facilitator, Achieve Ag was utilised to guide and formalise the process.

This document outlines the Vision, Purpose, and Framework for WESCI including a charter of conduct.

Vision

For more people and prosperity across the region to be achieved by:

- Capital raising
- Novel use of existing infrastructure and companion industries
- Enduring Innovation and value adding

Purpose

To drive initiatives that:

- are large and transformational to enable effective and enduring change
- are not being driven by existing community groups or organisations.

Charter of Conduct

The Group resolves to discuss issues in a constructive manner and:

- Listen and hear each other and be respectful
- Acknowledge what was not in their control



- Take responsibility for the things they can control

Practically, this means to:

- Show leadership;
- Look forward;
- Be proactive;
- Focus on solutions

Priorities

1. Create an effective plan (of which this document forms a part) to drive change under three themes
 - a. Exploring novel options to obtain access to water
 - b. Improve revenue from regionally produced goods through value adding and innovation including exploring new transformational farm practices and new industries that may suit our environment, and are supported by the community
 - c. Explore novel methods of raising funds for individuals and groups to purchase water and to facilitate business growth and aid the exiting of retiring businesses.
2. Resource and execute the plan with regular checks and readjustments as required.



Theme Summaries

Theme	Aim	Method	Output
1. Capital Raising	To improve the capacity of the community to raise capital for new ventures and for the growth of existing ventures including stabilising the security of water	Resource and execute the following: -Further testing of community interest -Investor ready awareness program and resources for structuring commercial partnerships -High level information sessions -Capacity building on joint-ventures etc. -A forum to cultivate relationships -Regional Brand / geographic differentiation -Communications and marketing package -Marketing and sales training	1. Resources (training, information, fit for purpose partnership prototypes, networks, brand, communications,) that enable community members to raise capital 2. Links to sources of capital 3. Realistic expectations
2. Novel use of existing infrastructure and companion industries	To look at novel ways to utilise existing infrastructure while improving the economic capacity of the region	Test plausibility pros and cons of initiatives. of: -Reverse passage of water in the irrigation infrastructure -Utilisation of Tullakool evaporation pond for commercial purposes -Companion industry investigations-e.g intensive animals, crop waste, compost.	1. Short list plausible and feasible initiatives 2. Community champions 3. Execution plan 4. Potential partners
2. Enduring Innovation	To establish viable sources of new income by testing plausibility and feasibility of new industries	Test plausibility pros and cons of initiatives. of: -Aquaculture -Renewable energy -Large scale greenhouses -High Pressure Processing (HPP) Plant -Pharmaceutical production facility -Education and innovation centre	1. Short list plausible and feasible initiatives 2. Community champions 3. Execution plan 4. Potential partners

WESCI acknowledges and supports the following important activities but does not see itself as the main driver in relation to:



- **Water**-lobbying to minimize further loss of secure water in next phase of MDBP is addressed by other groups.
- **Improving on farm efficiency of existing practices**- very important and will have impact. Is being addressed by existing agencies and initiatives.
- **Leveraging natural assets for tourism**- while tourism has room for growth, other entities such as Murray Tourism and the Shire should address this space. The potential impact is not large enough to fill the gap created by lost revenue from irrigated agriculture.



Appendix 1: Information Audit in workshops 1 and 2 that lead to the themes and priorities

Broad Topic	Barriers and knowledge gaps	Resources	Initiatives
Access to Water	<p><i>Barriers</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Recovery of water -Ownership of water -Government Policy -Trade between Valleys -Saline Ground water <p>Gaps</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Knowledge of water trading systems -Investors -Skills of farmers to trade water -Trading of E-water -Awareness of existing resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Three sources of water: MIL, MI and Murray River -Investors who own or wish to own water -Groundwater -On farm efficiency grants -Drought risk management grants -Collective farming grants -<i>See also capital</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Novel water storage using existing infrastructure (Tullakool evaporation ponds) and reverse pumping back to farms -On water farm storage -Novel and long term water supply contracts between owners and users - Local community investment fund - Community Water Trust (Foundation for investors and philanthropists) -<i>See also capital</i>
Value adding and innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Human resources -Community acceptance -Access to knowledge -Infrastructure -Digital connectivity and Mobile phone coverage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Demographics-older population -Recognisable regional brand -Communications and promotion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Economic development resources within Shire and Regional Development Australia and State Level (LLS). -MDBA -Federal Initiatives for Rural regions -Austrade -People with good ideas and business track records in the region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Processing / value add facilities: e.g. Example 1: HPP (high pressure processing) to add value to food Example 2: Pharmaceutical grade product manufacturing and food fortification / additives / supplements from local crops. New industries and companion industries 1. Aquaculture in Tullakool Evap ponds and other areas Example 1: Mega Green House horticultural production (+/-coal fired power)



Broad Topic	Barriers and knowledge gaps	Resources	Initiatives
	packages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Existing community groups -Tourism Initiatives and support organizations -Leadership programs and entrepreneurship programs to attract youth back to the region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Intensive Animals-Pigs/poultry/feedlots 3. Compost manufacture and subsoil amelioration 4. Renewable Energy-Wind/solar 5. Vertically Integrated Education & Agtech start up incubator.
Access to Capital (Capital Raising)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Desired Investment timeframe and return expectations -Knowledge and skill set of groups seeking investment -Cultural differences between investors and JV or operations partners -Expectation of Joint ventures parties, short and long term -Demographic -Awareness of resources -Finding willing investors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Existing investment models -Ag Investment conferences -Ag Investment advisory services -Ag Investment publications and narratives -Leadership programs and entrepreneurship programs to attract youth back to the region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Investor ready education initiatives to create a skill base for businesses seeking partnerships in land, water and infrastructure -Develop fit for purpose investment and partnerships models for the region to provide for diversity in investment opportunities and diversity in capital sources - Regional Brand -Communications and marketing package -Marketing and sales training Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Leverage external & community capital sources for -Long term water or land leasing; -Share farming of land or water -Joint ventures -Infrastructure or machinery investment -Community infrastructure and services -Crowdfunding