

# Edward Wakool Land Stewardship Incentive Program and Environmental Assessment Pilot

## COUNCIL NAME

Murray River Council

## WEB ADDRESS

<https://www.murrayriver.nsw.gov.au/Home>

## SIZE

11,865 square kilometres

## POPULATION

12,000

## Overview of the project

In 2020, Murray River Council (MRC) developed an [Adverse Event Plan](#) (AEP) via input from the local community to prepare for and recover from the impact of adverse events – be it drought, flood, fire or pandemic. To support the AEP, Western Murray Land Improvement Group (WMLIG) has developed the [Edward Wakool Land Stewardship Incentive Program](#) scoping document supported by Murray River Council's (MRC) [Building Our Communities in Advance Project](#), via funding from Local Government NSW.

This scoping document explores the growing market for environmental goods and services (EG&S) which will provide a new and more stable income stream to diversify and buffer farms against the cyclical and variable nature of farm incomes and improve preparedness for climate change. This reduces the reliance on government farm subsidy and support schemes, such as emergency drought relief, and incentivises good holistic farm management practices.

The scoping document provides context for the development of pilot carbon and biodiversity programs at the local (MRC area) and regional / catchment scale level as have occurred in the Far West and Riverina area of NSW via the [carbon + biodiversity pilot](#).

WMLIG and partners have started aggregating a pilot proposal (a wildlife corridor) with several MRC landholders to take to market to attract investment from not only within Australia, but internationally from companies, ethical investor fund managers and impact offset schemes.

The project builds on resilience principles and strategies of the AEP, **'a community-led recovery'**, **'plan in the good times to be prepared for the bad times'**, **'continuous learning and improvement'**, **'build resilience with adaptive methods'**, **'diversify the economy and capture value at home'**, **'build the capacity of the community'**, and **provide clear, timely and accurate communication'**.

The project also aligns with the NSW DPIE report [Western Enabling Regional Adaptation](#), regarding a change model for land management in the Riverina Murray region; *"Futurecast; Through the adoption of best practice and supported by new business models for private land management including carbon and biodiversity, the agricultural sector is more resilient to climate and commodity market cycles, strengthening the regional economy"*. Resource Management of Riverina Murray landscapes was described as sometimes being held in policy silos which can limit collaboration with private land managers. Engagement with stakeholders should aim to foster a shared understanding of landscape value. Endangered species that are managed in situ could fare better if managed at a landscape scale. For Riverine Ecosystems, new approaches to land management that recognise the value of stewardship and provision of ecosystem services and that build new markets for investment into land management can lead to more sustainable landscapes that are resilient to climate effects. Interflow of knowledge between managers across land tenures, and integration of experiential, cultural and scientific knowledge through local management of biodiversity will underpin this resilience.

## How the project was carried out

A literature review was conducted to inform the Edward Wakool Land Stewardship Incentive Program Scoping Document referencing future CSIRO environmental market opportunities, the range of EG&S programs available (many are in their infancy), and alignment to MRC strategic focus areas (Community Strategic Plan 2018-2028 and Local Strategic Planning Statement 2020-2040), NRM Regional Plans (2013 to 2023 Murray Catchment Strategic Plan) and National Plans (Coordinator-General for Drought's advice on a Strategy for Drought Preparedness and Resilience (April 2019).



## REFERENCES

WMLIG Edward  
Wakool Land  
Stewardship  
Program Scoping  
Document.

NSW DPIE Report,  
Western Enabling  
Regional Adaptation

Apart from the Scoping Document development, the project has funded WMLIG to conduct the following activities:

- Attend EG&S information sessions, including Steering Committee time for development of the [Regen Farmers Mutual](#).
- Build capacity of five staff to conduct carbon and biodiversity assessments.
- Develop an initial farm assessment questionnaire.
- Field test soil carbon and biodiversity assessments on one farm.
- Use of [Farmlab project management software](#) (\$275 / month for 5 farms – max. 1,000 acres) to create a pilot farm digital twin.
- Soil carbon testing and farm carbon assessment report.
- Preliminary Biodiversity Stewardship Site Assessment (Rhidian Harrington, Bio-Conservancy Australia \$2,025).
- Part-sponsor training of staff to Accounting for Nature (AfN) assessment methodology
- Scope opportunities for pilot project funding.
- Produce a YouTube video.
- Complete an [environmental accounting assessment summary report](#) on lessons learned and attend a regional information sharing event (Finley) with the Murray Landcare Collective and LLS stakeholders.



## Outcomes now and in the future

### Current opportunity:

WMLIG is currently developing an application for the [Regen Farmers Mutual Landscape Impact Accelerator Program](#) and WWF using the Scoping document as a reference document. If successfully funded the program will create diverse and practical examples of landscape scale transactions and farmer engagement processes across different environmental markets and be used to educate leaders and create a community of practice.

### Opportunities moving forward:

WMLIG is well placed to support future program trials such as a pilot scheme in the Edward Wakool region. WMLIG will provide an impartial information broker service so landholders can access appropriate markets that can financially support improved environmental outcomes and diversify income streams. The alignment to these objectives will lead to:

- Education and awareness raising activities.
- Enhancement and protection of our waterways, landscapes and environmental assets and encourage best practice land management. The project has great synergies with the NSW Reconnecting River Country Program.
- Encourage and develop community initiatives to enhance and protect the natural environment, such as focus groups to manage and control pest plants and pest animals.
- Diversify the economy and create jobs.
- Diversify and stabilise farm income streams and support landholders to become climate-change ready.

## Benefits and lessons learned

New EG&S markets will build community resilience. New markets will support local jobs which will stimulate the economy, build capacity via the provision of new skills and knowledge that will bring professionals to rural areas and small towns, which is key to future transformational leadership.

### Lessons Learned:

- Environmental assessment methods need to be chosen carefully to ensure good use of resources. It appears several assessment methods are not suitable for use across all areas of NSW as pre 1750 vegetation map data is not available to use for methods such as Habitat



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Hectares and AfN. ***WMLIG would welcome the opportunity to have access to pre 1750 map data so local people can conduct environmental assessments and not rely on external consultants.***

- There is currently a range of EG&S programs, however many are in their infancy, and some markets, such as the carbon market have been very complex regarding the methodology and verification process. Value to the farmer is also questionable, with income split roughly 50:50 between the farmer and brokers and consultants. EG&S product risk is likely borne by the landholder, so this information needs to be taken into account before embarking on a carbon farming contract.
- Feedback from the MRC Leadership Team was that EG&S contract agreements need to be provided to Regional Emergency Services, as this alters the value of landscape assets and prioritisation considerations for emergency service resource provision.

## More information

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Western Murray  
Land Improvement Group

