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Natural resource management intermediaries as potential next-users

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Planning for

Impact

Series

**Natural Resource
Management intermediaries
as potential next-users**

Jamie Bowyer & Marie Shanks

January 2007



**Department of Agriculture and Food
Government of Western Australia**



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The Purpose of this Document

This document is to support NRM Program staff within the Department of Agriculture and Food (DAFWA) in planning for impact of their research and extension work. It does this by listing the intermediaries that play a role in the NRM sector who could be potential next-users for NRM projects information, products and services. The process of identifying these potential next-users and targeting activities to their unique characteristics will be useful for anybody who is planning a project where the final change is achieved through intermediaries.

It is primarily targeted at those who develop, manage and deliver projects within the NRM Program. However, the principles have wider application and could also be used by Industry Programs within DAFWA, as well as others who manage and deliver projects with NRM outcomes.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

A wide range of individuals and organisations play a role in Natural Resource Management (NRM) in Western Australia currently. Many different service providers also interact with farmers and land managers to assist or influence farm management decision making. This extensive network has the potential to be tapped by NRM projects to more efficiently influence on-ground practice change. Given the current environment of 'information overload' it is even more important to use these established networks effectively rather than to invent new ones.

1.2 Scope

This document lists a selection of NRM-related intermediaries and the roles they play in the agricultural sector. Where available, further information is provided on the characteristics, strengths and weaknesses of these intermediaries in relation to NRM projects as potential next-users. Please note this is not necessarily a complete list, and also that there can be significant variation within these groupings. A list of the sources of information referred to in this document is also provided.

1.3 Defining next-users and end-users

The term 'next-user' describes the target audience/s for the direct intended change a project is aiming for; that is, the individuals or groups the project wishes to influence directly. These are the people who will then influence 'end-users'.

'End-user' describes individuals or groups associated with a final or 'ultimate' intended change. In agriculture and natural resource management, end-users are usually farmers or other land managers.

Focusing on intended change differentiates next-users and end-users from other project target audiences, such as partners, funders and other project stakeholders.

A good example of next and end-users is the 'Promoting salinity solutions through agribusiness' project conducted by the CRC for Plant-based Management of Dryland Salinity. This project aims to increase the area of lucerne and other perennials across southern Australia by making the latest information on establishment and management of lucerne and other perennials available to farmers through a national network of local agribusiness agents. In this instance the CRC wishes to directly influence the agribusiness agents, so the agents are the next-users. The farmers are the ultimate group that the project wishes to influence through the agribusiness agents therefore they are the end-users.

1.4 How will this document be useful?

It is useful for project planners and managers to be aware of the range of potential next-users that play a role in NRM. It is also important to understand that these individuals and organisations are not a homogenous group. Each has their own unique characteristics in terms of how, and in which areas, they may influence end-users (land managers) and, in how they prefer to engage with other 'partners' (i.e. DAFWA). These factors need to be taken into account when planning projects. In short, segmenting your project's next-users rather than a "one size fits all" approach will enhance project effectiveness when working via next-users.

- Identifying the range of potential next-users already active in the existing network of extension, and providing them with the tools and information to improve profitability and sustainability of their clients, allows organisations such as DAFWA to target and

channel relevant research outputs to those who can tailor the information to their local audience (Green 2005).

- By using existing networks instead of competing with them, NRM projects are more likely to reach land managers in an environment of information overload.
- May help projects to identify, prioritise and target particular audiences to best meet their project objectives with the limited resources available to them.
- Research will only become valuable if it reaches the sectors of industry who can apply it. Identifying and working with potential next-users is designed to assist with this.

2. Intermediaries and potential next-users

As mentioned, a wide range of organisations play roles in NRM and/or provide services to land managers. Below is a list of broad groupings of these potential next-users for NRM projects. The information presented is necessarily generic. For each region, industry or situation it will be important to have a more specific understanding of each potential next-user group and key individuals within it.

The 13 groupings described in this document are:

- NRM regional groups
- Private sector consultants
- Agribusiness
- Farmer groups
- Land Conservation District Committees
- Other farmers
- Tertiary institutions
- Local government officers
- Rural research and development organisations
- Private contractors
- Department of Agriculture and Food industry programs
- Non-government organisations
- Government agencies.

2.1 NRM regional groups

Role: Regional NRM groups such as Avon Catchment Council, South West Catchment Council and others now play a key role in NRM in the State. They consult with a wide range of stakeholders including land managers, business, the broad community, government and non-government organisations. They have all recently developed strategies and investment plans to address key NRM issues on a regional basis. DAFWA regional NRM projects have provided information on threats to the agricultural resource base to assist in the development of these strategies and investment plans. A large amount of government funding for environmental repair and management is directed through these regional groups. They are essentially funding organisations for NRM action.

The structure of each regional group is slightly different with some having a sub-regional layer as well. They all have program and project managers for sustainable land management-type programs and projects. They fund a large number of projects that are delivered by both private and public sector providers as well as by their own staff. DAFWA delivers a number of projects for regional NRM groups. These providers are potential next-users for NRM projects.

The regional NRM groups employ, either directly or indirectly through projects, a large number of Natural Resource Management Officer (NRMOs) or Community Landcare Coordinator (CLC) type positions. These people play a number of roles including providing technical expertise, community engagement and facilitation. In addition, the regional groups currently host Regional Landcare Coordinator positions funded through the National Landcare Program. Within the groups it will be important to identify the different roles various positions play in relation to your project.

Strengths:

- Consult with a broad range of stakeholders including farmers and farmer organisations.
- Control a large amount of funding.
- Contract a wide range of providers that deliver projects at ground level.
- Some groups have a strong sub-regional structure that allows more local access.
- On-ground projects are generally targeted to specific high value assets moving away from the previous vegemite approach of NHT1.

In relation to NRMO and CLC positions:

- Good relationships with local landholders through Community Landcare Coordinator-type positions (GHD 2006).
- Well developed collaboration between CLCs, particularly in adjacent areas (GHD 2006).
- Wide range of expertise (GHD 2006).

Weaknesses:

- Short-term funding.
- Regional group may act more as a funder for targeted projects rather than having a direct influence on end-users.

In relation to NRMO and CLC positions:

- Technical skills are not at a level that enable them to advise landholders in certain circumstances (GHD 2006).
- Are often relatively inexperienced (Marsh & Pannell 1998).
- Across the board CLCs do not appear to have a common set of skills (GHD 2006).
- Generally they require additional assistance to analyse and resolve more complex and detailed problems (GHD 2006).
- They often provide broad advice without giving any action-oriented direction (Lloyd 2003).
- Lack of follow up can erode confidence and credibility (Lloyd 2003).
- Not so good at focusing on client profitability (Roberts *et al.* 2005).
- Relatively high turnover may mean limited local knowledge and networks with end-users and/or lack of follow through requiring re-engagement with new inexperienced NRMO/CLC.

How could NRM projects use them: The service providers who deliver projects for the regional NRM groups are potential next-users for NRM projects. Those involved need to consult with the regional groups to identify opportunities to inform these service providers with the latest NRM project information, products and services.

Depending on the regional group structure, there are a number of project managers, natural resource management officers and similar positions could be informed about the latest NRM project information, products and services.

At a third level, NRM projects could endeavour to influence strategy and priorities of these groups by informing the regional group of the latest NRM information.

Generally, approaches to regional NRM groups should be made through the manager for each DAFWA regional NRM project as they already have strong links with these organisations. DAFWA has a representative on each regional group council.

2.2 Private sector consultants

Role: Private sector consultants provide information and advice, for a fee, on all aspects of farming including farm management, personal relationships, finances, taxation and business development (Fulton *et al.* 2003). They generally provide service to 'innovative farmers' who are prepared to pay and act as information consolidators and are advisors to these farmers (Stone 2005). Some have a good understanding of the practical aspects of farming and the ability to integrate innovations whilst considering profitability, sustainability and social aspects of the recommendations to farmers (T. Lacey, pers comm).

Strengths:

- Private sector consultants access a wide variety of information and distil it for the farmers they service.
- There is increasing use of private agricultural consultants across Australia and across industries – well in excess of 1300. Consultants are looking to broaden their base and attract new clients (Roberts & Coutts 2005).
- There is a wide range of private consulting undertaken in rural Australia. Most consultants to agricultural enterprises focus on business and technology management with some inroads into marketing, human resources and succession. Roles range from the provision of advice to facilitating change and providing training (Roberts & Coutts 2005).
- Private consultants can provide a professional external opinion on management decisions for agricultural enterprises. Independence is valued (Roberts & Coutts 2005).
- They play the 'Honest Broker' role with no pecuniary interest in information and advice provided (Stone 2005).
- They work closely with individual farm businesses, therefore are in close touch with current issues (Stone 2005).
- Generally they provide a service to 'innovative farmers' (Stone 2005).
- Farm consultants are usually available immediately (Research Solutions 2000).
- They are familiar with particular properties (Research Solutions 2000).
- They are seen to provide significant value due to their ability to comment on what has and has not worked well across a broad variety of specific circumstances to which they have been exposed.

Weaknesses:

- The incapacity (inability) of the private sector to immediately provide similar levels of R,D&E services to those previously offered by government (Stone 2005).
- Not so good at focusing on environmental health (Roberts *et al.* 2005).
- Tend to work with innovative farmers and farmers prepared to pay and not the larger group of traditional farmers (Stone 2005).
- 'Traditional farmers' not prepared to pay (Stone 2005).
- Uncertainty over use of NRM information among consultants, particularly where it may conflict with production or economic information.

How could NRM projects use them: If innovative farmers are the target audience for a project, then working through consultants may be an effective way of accessing them. NRM projects could use these consultants to get a picture of farmers' current information needs and whether NRM-related matters are issues of significance for innovative farmers. It would be worth contacting consultants to find out what NRM information farmers source from them. They may also act as a good sounding board for testing new technologies or systems. Consultants may prefer a limited number of DAFWA officers approaching them with NRM information so initial approach could be through the regional NRM project team.

2.3 Agribusiness

Role: A number of companies provide a range of services to farmers through the sale of products and other support. Two large companies are Elders and Landmark. Agronomists and field officers from these companies provide information and advice on inputs to manage crop, livestock and pasture production. This advice is generally linked to the supply and sale of various products by the company employing the agronomist. They tend to be used more by traditional farmers who are not prepared to pay consultants, however innovative farmers will use them to confirm decisions already made (Stone 2005).

Agronomists generally work one-to-one with individual clients but do conduct trials and extension activities such as field days to demonstrate product use to a wider audience. The roles of agronomists vary between companies and even within companies. In some cases agronomists will be directed by individual branch/store managers, leading to an emphasis on the sale of products or developing longer term client relationships for the company, for example some agronomists provide similar whole-farm advice to farmers as consultants (T. Lacey, pers comm).

Strengths:

- Work one-on-one often with larger farm enterprises.
- Agronomists cover a wide range of industries and issues/situations (Stone 2005).
- Good understanding of the whole-farm enterprise (T. Lacey, pers comm).

Weaknesses:

- Conservation advice sourced from production-related sources may not be considered credible (Farmer Bowers & Lane 2006).
- Range of experience.
- Range of driving/motivating forces, so although the company may have NRM objectives they can be driven by immediate needs of the store managers (T. Lacey, pers comm).

How could NRM projects use them: At a company level NRM projects could endeavour to influence company priorities by raising awareness and understanding of NRM issues and impacts on agriculture in general. This is probably a role that should be coordinated at a State level. At a more local level NRM projects need to consider and consult with agronomists to explore what opportunities may exist to work with them. It would be worth project managers discussing with agronomists if they have any information needs in relation to NRM aspects of farming.

2.4 Farmer groups

Roles: A large number of farmer groups play different roles within the agricultural community. These range from large organisations like the Kondinin Group with 10,000 members to small local groups with six or seven members. Each group plays a different role but broadly they aim to improve productivity and sustainability for members. They source, generate and disseminate information to members using a range of different mechanisms. They are often a mix of partnerships with agribusiness, government and community.

All of the groups have a contact person, or for larger groups executive officers and/or project officers. The activity level across the groups varies from occasional meetings and field walks to conducting large scale trials, employing many staff and being guided by boards.

Example farmer groups:

- Kondinin Group – large organisation
- Mingenew-Irwin Group – medium organisation
- Facey Group – medium organisation
- Liebe Group – medium organisation
- Saltland Pastures Association – small to medium organisation
- Ravensthorpe Agricultural Initiative Network – medium organisation
- North Mallee Farm Improvement group – small group.

Strengths:

- Working through executive officers and contact people is an efficient way to access a large number of farmers.
- Well organised and influential farm production groups may draw a greater proportion of research funds than less organised and influential groups (Ridley 2004).
- 47% of broadacre and dairy farms had a representative who was a member of landcare or similar group (Hodges & Goesch 2006). Participants in natural resource management programs or landcare groups were more likely to adopt what have been identified as more sustainable management practices (Hodges & Goesch 2006). Attribution to the programs and groups is difficult as having degradation could motivate involvement or involvement could bring about greater awareness and adoption.
- Such groups are a good forum for discussing issues, as farmers read an article and then discuss the advantages, disadvantages and practicalities of the information (Lloyd 2003).

Weaknesses:

- Group objectives may not include NRM issues (more likely with smaller groups).
- Burn out can occur from too few doing all the work (more so for small local groups).
- Workload of officers may make it difficult to work with them.

How could NRM projects use them: These groups provide potential access to a large number of farmers. Projects should identify the most relevant groups and consult with them as to how best they could work together, as it will differ between groups. These groups could also be potential partners that would then allow access to funding not available to government agencies such as National Landcare Program.

GRDC is supporting two grower group affiliations that have project officers who would be key contacts in the *Local Farmer Group Network* (www.lfgn.org.au/home) and *The Grower Group Alliance* (www.grdc.com.au/growers/gg/gga/). These projects are coming to the end of their current funding arrangements (December 2006) and an amalgamated project will be presented to GRDC for further funding in 2007.

2.5 Land Conservation District Committees

Role: Land Conservation District Committees (LCDCs) are statutory bodies established under section 23 of Soil and Land Conservation Act 1945 (the Act).

The functions are to develop and promote soil and land conservation practices within its land conservation district. This may include managing projects that aim to prevent, remedy or mitigate land degradation and promote soil conservation. Additionally an LCDC may report to the Commissioner on the effects of land use or management within its district and make recommendations for the implementation of programmes for soil and land conservation.

In recent times many LCDCs have lost momentum for a number of reasons and have been wound up or evolved into organisations with a broader focus (such as incorporated farmer and catchment groups). Some continue to play a role in NRM at a local level.

Strengths:

- Well connected to local community.
- May provide a link to incorporated catchment groups.

Weaknesses:

- Too narrow a focus.
- Declining or very small membership.

How could NRM projects use them: NRM projects could identify those LCDCs that are still active and consult with them to identify opportunities to work together. One opportunity may be simple communication on a regular basis to keep them informed of the latest information, services and products from NRM projects. LCDCs provide a way of identifying some farmers in an area who have an interest in NRM and may be willing to be involved in projects.

2.6 Other farmers

Role: Other farmers play an important role in information networks in agriculture. Farmers exchange information at various events (field days, workshops, crop updates, forums etc) which is highly valued and considered to be from a credible source (Research Solutions 2000, URS 2002, Lloyd 2003, Heath *et al.* 2006).

Strengths:

- Farmers consider other farmers to be a credible source of information (Heath *et al.* 2006).
- Other farmers are willing to share information (Research Solutions 2000).
- Other farmers are available socially, at field days and by telephone (Research Solutions 2000).
- Information they provide is likely to be locally relevant.

Weaknesses:

- The potential to pass poorly understood or incorrect technical information throughout a network (Heath *et al.* 2006).
- Difficult to identify key individuals or extent of networks relevant for each NRM topic.

How could NRM projects use them: NRM projects could identify leading farmers as a key group of people to target for their information, products and services. These could then influence a wider group of farmers through whatever networks are operating in a district or region. Local knowledge would be used to identify these leading farmers. There is also potential to identify individual farmers as champions for particular causes.

2.7 Tertiary institutions (Universities & TAFE)

Role: Universities provide training in agriculture and NRM through bachelors degrees, masters, PhDs and short courses. Universities carry out research on NRM and other agriculture related topics and also work in conjunction with government departments and other organisations (other universities, farmers, research institutions, agricultural industries etc) to carry out this type of research. TAFE has a similar role and provides training in agriculture and NRM through certificate, diploma and advanced diploma courses. TAFE differs from universities in that the courses are very practical and tailored to job requirements while university courses tend to be more focused on theory.

Strengths:

- Providing quality education to improve the sustainability of agriculture.
- On-farm research with farmers may enhance credibility of researchers as source of information and advice.
- TAFE is a Registered Delivery Organisation so can deliver accredited training courses.

Weaknesses:

- High university fees.
- May provide training on topics that are considered irrelevant and out of date by farmers.

How could NRM projects use them: There is opportunity for NRM projects to ensure that universities are teaching the latest NRM information. Projects should consider consulting with the relevant people within teaching organisations to identify mechanisms to inform them of the latest NRM information, services and products. This will ensure that graduates who are employed in the agricultural sector have the latest NRM knowledge. There are also opportunities to host honours/PhD students.

2.8 Local government officers

Role: Some local governments in regional areas employ Natural Resource Management Facilitators, Landcare Implementation Officers or other similarly titled officers. Depending on the shire, these positions cover a range of roles including provision of technical information, project management and community engagement.

Strengths:

- Direct access to farmers/communities through positions.
- Less influenced by funding cycles for programs such as NHT and NAP.
- Can be valued community resources.

Weaknesses:

- Priorities may change due to shire requirements.
- Range of experience levels.

How could NRM projects use them: These positions are potential next-users for NRM projects. Projects should identify those shires with relevant positions and consult with them to identify how they can work together. May also be able to support the development of local NRM industries.

2.9 Rural research & development corporations

Role: Fifteen rural research & development corporations (RDCs) operate in Australia covering virtually all of the agricultural industries. The RDCs bring industry and researchers together to establish research and development strategic directions and to fund projects that provide industry with the innovation and productivity tools to compete in global markets (www.ruralrdc.com.au/default.aspx).

The **Cooperative Research Centres (CRC)** Programme was established to bring together researchers and research users. The programme maximises the benefits of research through collaborative arrangements. It also has a strong education component with a focus on producing graduates with skills relevant to industry needs (www.crc.gov.au/Information/default.aspx).

Strengths:

- Identify, fund and provide high quality relevant research.
- They bring together a wide range of stakeholders.

Weaknesses:

- Focused on research instead of broad scale implementation (Lucas & Turner 2006).

How could NRM projects use them: NRM projects need to be aware of these organisations and how they operate. At a higher level there is opportunity for NRM projects to influence strategy and priorities to ensure projects relevant to NRM are funded or that other projects funded consider NRM as part of project outcomes. It would also be useful for NRM projects to identify service providers who deliver projects funded through many of these organisations with a view to identifying potential next-users.

2.10 Private contractors

Role: Private contractors provide a service for fee to farmers in a number of technical areas. A good example is earthworks contractors who often advise farmers on the different structures that can be used to solve a particular problem and then construct them. Earthworks contractors are expected to fill the gap left by the withdrawal of agency one-on-one extension services, but this is yet to happen in many areas. Also where there is a disparity between the advice given by DAFWA and the advice given by the contractor, the farmer tends to go with the contractor, who is on-site and has seen the problem first-hand.

Strengths:

- Private contractors are sometimes available immediately similar to consultants.
- Have a general knowledge of the area and the farmer's property which farmers appreciate.

Weaknesses:

- There is a shortage of skills in the earthmoving industry which has impeded the successful construction of earthworks construction on farms (TAFE WA).
- Contractors generally provide a narrow range of advice focused on their area of speciality.
- Lack of accreditation.

How could NRM projects use them: Projects need to identify what contractors are operating that are relevant to their project and consult with them to see how they can work together.

2.11 Department of Agriculture and Food industry programs

The Department of Agriculture and Food has a number of programs that are potential next-users for NRM program information, services and products. The key programs are Animal Industries Development, Horticulture Industry Development, Grain Industries Development and Farm Business Development. NRM projects should be aware of these programs and associated projects and consider them strongly as partners and potential next-users.

2.12 Non government organisations

Role: There are some key non-government organisations that play important roles in NRM. WWF is an independent conservation organisation which is part of an international network. WWF's work spans the full spectrum of conservation activities from on-ground field projects through to long-term, large-scale programs, and policy formulation through to public and political campaigns. Greening Australia is a national organisation which has a similar role but there is emphasis on tree planting to embrace environmental issues such as water quality and salinity, biodiversity and community capacity building. Men of the Trees is another international organisation with a branch in Western Australia. Its focus is addressing salinity and land degradation through planting trees.

Strengths

- Involve local communities and indigenous groups in the planning and execution of projects.
- Attract funds from a range of sources to assist in environmental repair and protection.
- Have potential to influence stakeholders on a global scale.

Weaknesses:

- Sometimes seen as not supporting the integration of agricultural production and being too environmentally focused.

How could NRM projects use them: These groups are very community focused and often work one-on-one with farmers. There is potential to build partnerships with these organisations and use these groups as a mechanism to access farmers. NRM projects could also target their project information to these groups. It would be worthwhile for NRM projects to contact these organisations to discuss what opportunities there might be to inform them of NRM project information, services and products.

2.13 Government agencies

Role: There are several other State Government agencies and organisations that play important roles in NRM. The key agencies are the Department of Water, the Department of Environment and Conservation and the Department for Planning and Infrastructure. These are large organisations and it is beyond the scope of this document to detail particular people or projects as potential next-users. NRM projects should consider these organisations and where possible or relevant consult with them to identify opportunities to provide them with NRM information, service and products.

3. Steps from here

This document describes a selection of organisations that play roles in NRM, and service providers that interact with farmers, that are potential next-users for NRM projects. The groupings are broad and necessarily generic.

To move forward, NRM project teams need to:

- Understand what next-users/intermediaries are, and how they can help improve project impact.
- Identify specific potential next-users/intermediaries for their project, using the broad groups described here as a starting point for discussion.
- Research characteristics of the specific potential next-users identified, to confirm you have the right next-users for your project. This will also help understand next-user needs and wants. See Section 4 below for suggestions.
- Use this knowledge and understanding to target your project information, products and services most effectively and efficiently to achieve project impact.

4. Things you should know about your next-users

It is essential to check that the potential next-users identified by your team are the right ones. Knowing the following information will help check you have the right next-users for your project, and in addition help you understand next-user needs. This ensures that products and services are developed or designed to be of greatest value to those next-users.

NB. When talking to potential next-users, put thought into what questions you need to ask, and be considerate in how you ask questions. The important context for any discussion is that understanding more about each other will benefit both in achieving outcomes more effectively and efficiently. Building relationships is important.

Suggestions

About the next-user

- Objectives and interests in NRM.
- Main areas of interaction/specialty with land managers.
- Extent of their interaction with land managers, including geographic spread, and number and frequency of contacts/interactions.
- What NRM products/information/services are currently (or potentially) of value to them?
- Are they targeting products/services towards particular audience/s? Who are they targeting, and why? Within that, who are their end-users? Are there further next-users involved, and how?
- Is there a gap between what they are doing in NRM area, and what they would like to be doing? Reasons?

About the next-users' target audience/s

- What are the NRM-related needs of the target audience/s?
- How do the target audiences prefer NRM products/services packaged and presented?
- How are target audiences using NRM products/services?

NB. It may pay to check if your potential next-user has collected this information in a rigorous way or just through their own instincts.

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