



Incentives for conserving biodiversity



"[The program] was a fantastic source of information. It changed our whole view of the property and our view of what we would do with it."

Program participant

An innovative pilot program has given landholders in southern New South Wales new opportunities to manage their properties, so they conserve the bush and protect biodiversity.

The Southern Rivers Bush Incentives program was developed by the New South Wales Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority with help from the New South Wales Department of Environment and Conservation and \$500,000 funding from the Australian Government's Natural Heritage Trust. The pilot runs for three years from 2004.

The pilot provides government funds for conservation management, direct to landholders. This follows a competitive bidding system where landholders put in expressions of interest for funding.

Key features of the program

The program is trialing an auction or tender approach to providing funding incentives for environmental activities.

Differing from many grant schemes, it gives landholders full control in estimating the amount of money required to achieve particular objectives. It is an innovative and flexible approach to conserving native vegetation, based on the skills and time that landholders are willing to contribute. The Catchment Management Authority does not impose a costing guideline, or any budgetary constraints.

An obligation free property visit and site assessment by a project officer is a key component of the program. Vegetation values of each site are quantified by using a detailed scoring system. This allows the conservation values of different sites to be compared and rated against each other.

The program is targeted to conserving vegetation communities that are officially listed as threatened, have been largely cleared across the region, or that exist only as small, remnant patches in the landscape. These communities are given a higher score in the assessment process than widespread and common vegetation.





A land management plan tailored to the landholder's specific needs is then negotiated as part of the bid. The plan specifies what must be done to conserve biodiversity over a five to ten year period. There are a variety of site management options to choose from. For example, these may include weed and feral animal control, retention of fallen timber, revegetation and vegetation protection. Some sites may need complete removal of stock to protect the vegetation and the landholder can factor this into their tender price. On the other hand, some sites may need a level of grazing pressure to maintain the ecosystem.

A probity officer is appointed by the Catchment Management Authority to ensure that the process of assessing bids is fair and kept at arm's length from the project officers who have assessed the sites. If a bid is successful a majority of the funds are provided to the landholder in the first year to cover upfront costs, with the remainder provided over the next two years.

The Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority (SRCMA) is a statutory authority established to encourage the protection and sustainable development of land, vegetation and water resources. The SRCMA extends from the Illawarra region to the Victorian border and west to include the catchments of the Shoalhaven, Snowy and Genoa Rivers.

How it works

1. An advertisement is placed in local newspapers calling for expressions of interest and inviting interested landholders to contact one of the two SRCMA project officers. An information pack is then sent to interested landholders.

2. A project officer visits the property and provides advice on site selection where appropriate. Once a site is selected the project officer assesses the native vegetation.
3. The project officer and landholder then develop an agreed management plan for the proposed site which outlines the services that the landholder is willing to provide, such as fencing around the site and weed control. The services provided by the landholder and the nature of the vegetation on the site decide the conservation score given to the site.
4. Once the management plan is finalised, the landholder has 21 days to determine the cost of implementing the management plan and how much money they will actually bid for. The landholder then lodges their bid with the SRCMA.
5. When the funding round is closed, an independent panel assesses each bid and ranks them for funding on the basis of best biodiversity value (i.e. conservation score) for money.
6. Landholders whose bids are successful are notified and receive funding based on annual reporting and progress.

Lessons learnt

This pilot program was implemented in 2004 and incentives provided to around 30 landholders in the region.

The program presented a steep learning curve for the SRCMA and for many landholders. Using a tender process for providing biodiversity incentives is a relatively new approach and a number of lessons were learnt from running the pilot, some of which are summarised below.

- Landholders indicated that they greatly valued the one on one contact with the project officers and the help with developing a management plan.
- The detailed scoring system ensured that ranking of bids and determination of successful bids was a straightforward and accountable process.
- The cost of managing an area for conservation is difficult to quantify. In future rounds, SRCMA aims to address this issue by providing applicants with an outline of the major issues to consider in properly costing a project.
- One of the aims of the tender approach is for the market (i.e. the landholders) to determine the cost of conservation. This approach is unlike funding programs with which applicants may have been more familiar and which come with specific criteria about how the money is to be spent. In future rounds, SRCMA will provide further information to landholders. This will emphasise that there is no particular benchmark for a successful bid and that the important point is that they request adequate funds to undertake their management plan.

Biodiversity encompasses the variety of all living things. Conserving biological diversity gives us the best chance of adapting to our rapidly changing world.

This leaflet is one of a series showing how farmers, Indigenous communities, local government and community groups have either initiated special biodiversity projects, or have successfully incorporated biodiversity protection into their work and daily lives.

We hope these success stories provide useful information and inspiration to others in similar situations.

For more information: www.nrm.gov.au; or freecall 1800 552 008

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Front: Rosella; Andrew Tatnell.

Blue Devil; Rebecca Hall.

Striped Legless Lizard.

Deua River; both Andrew Tatnell.

Back: Property owner Geoff White (r) & manager Peter Coble next to Snow Gum woodland remnant now protected with help from Bush Incentives Program; Donna Hazell.