

Farmers, voluntary stewardship programs, and collaborative natural resource governance in rural Australia

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ABSTRACT

Despite large financial investments by governments and farmers, as well as significant inputs of time, effort and goodwill, the ecological, social and productive capacity of the Australian rural environment is under threat. The nature of natural resource problems, the limited capacity of rural communities to solve them, and current and future constraints on governments pose immense challenges of rural natural resource governance. Both traditional governance measures, centred on public laws, and purely private and self-regulatory forms seem unable to meet these challenges. This has spurred interest in collaborative modes, with the hope that they combine the best of both the public and private spheres. Collaborative experiments are already underway in rural Australia, including a model involving the co-opting of voluntary stewardship programs (VSPs) for farmers in natural resource co-regulation. But there is insufficient empirical examination of how such arrangements work in practice. The great hopes attached to the success of collaborative governance are mostly theoretical or based on applications that may not be relevant to rural natural resources in Australia.

The lack of empirical validation of collaborative governance is a critical gap. Its practical efficacy may be underestimated or over-hyped. Empirical evaluation of natural resource issues is singularly difficult but, without some evaluation of the collaborative experiments, it will be hard for farmers, environmental organizations, governments, businesses along the agricultural supply chain, and citizens to make informed judgements about whether to embrace or reject collaborative arrangements.

This study takes up this challenge by undertaking a preliminary investigation of some of the potential of VSPs for farmers in governance partnerships. The research project was underpinned by close engagement with three groups associated with operational VSPs: Certified Land Management, Australian Certified Organic, and the Floodplain Organic Grains Group. The study included a review of relevant literature and the development and execution of a conceptual framework and methodology for empirical investigation. The standards of the three VSPs were reviewed in detail, and 23 farmers and seven stakeholders from government and civil society were interviewed.

The balance of the evidence is that these VSPs make important contributions to natural resource governance, which could be enhanced in partnerships with other government and non-government actors. Broadly speaking, they reinforce public interest values

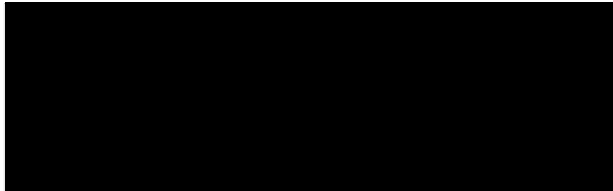
and norms, and guide participants towards implementing public interest outcomes. Participants have management plans that are subject to regular internal and independent external review. They are likely to be aware and committed, and to invest time and money in the implementation of their plans. There appear to be some important attitudinal and behavioural differences between VSP participants and non-participants in terms of their willingness to engage with the concerns of external stakeholders and willingness to find a variety of ways to make participation in VSPs work to the advantage of their businesses.

The significance of the study is threefold. It applies an integrated and disciplined research methodology, and overcomes the reticence of environmental law and governance scholarship to adopt a more evaluative and empirical approach to research on implementation of governance measures. It begins to fill the critical gaps in understanding of collaborative natural resource governance in rural Australia through empirical investigation. To the author's knowledge, it is the first study in Australia to apply the kinds of methodological and empirical approaches used in this study to investigate and affirm the collaborative governance potential of the selected VSPs. The study concludes with recommendations, in the form of a strawman proposal, to stimulate discussion among policymakers on ways to capitalize on the value of VSPs in governance collaborations, and makes suggestions for future research.

CERTIFICATION OF DISSERTATION

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis and all sources used have been acknowledged in this thesis.



Michael Andrew Lawson

21 March 2016

For Aimé, Hannah, Tim and Jono

All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in that community, but his ethics also prompt him to cooperate ... The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, animals, or collectively, the land.

Aldo Leopold¹

¹ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac - With Other Essays on Conservation from Round River* (Oxford University Press, 1966 ed, 1949) 219.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACCC	Australian Competition & Consumer Commission
ACO	Australian Certified Organic Pty Ltd
AgLaw	Australian Centre for Agriculture and Law
ALMG	Australian Land Management Group
AOL	Australian Organic Ltd
AQIS	Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service
ARC	Australian Research Council
BDRI	Bio-Dynamic Research Institute
BMP	Best Management Practice
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CER	Corporate environmental reporting
CLM	Certified Land Management
CSA	Community Supported Agriculture
CSG	Coal Seam Gas
EMS	Environmental Management System
ESS	Environmental Stewardship System
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FI Q	Farmer Interview Question
FMS	Farm Management System
FOGG	Floodplain Organic Grains Group
FSC	Forest Stewardship Council
FS Q	Farmer Survey Question
GLM	Grazing Land Management
GMO	Genetically Modified Organism
GRI	Global Reporting Initiative
HGP	Hormonal Growth Promotants
HIA	Horticulture Innovation Australia
IFOAM	International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
LWMP	Land and Water Management Plan
LWRDC	Land and Water Research and Development Corporation
MBI	Market-based instrument

MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MRL	Maximum Residue Level
MSA	Meat Standards Association
MSC	Marine Stewardship Council
NASAA	National Association for Sustainable Agriculture Australia
NCO	NASAA Certified Organic Pty Ltd
NEP	New Ecological Paradigm
NGO	Non-government organization
NRM	Natural resources management
OFA	Organic Federation of Australia
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OISCC	Organic Industry Standards and Certification Council
OMP	Organic Management Plan
OTA-RE	Organic Trust Australia – Research and Education
PGS	Participatory guarantee system
PMS	Property management system
QMDC	Queensland Murray-Darling Committee
R&D	Research and development
RIRDC	Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation
RSPCA	Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
SAFA	Sustainability Assessment of Food and Agriculture Systems
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
VSP	Voluntary stewardship program
WTO	World Trade Organization

