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Western Innovators: A fresh approach to landholder capacity building in the Western Catchment of New South Wales.

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Abstract:

Western Innovators is a mentorship program run by the Western Catchment Management Authority (CMA) which aims to support enterprise development and practice change being implemented by landholders living in the Western Catchment of far west New South Wales. This program has been established with the intention of providing landholders with a fresh form of capacity building and support to achieve improved natural resource management. The program also looks to establish a network of landholders to provide support in implementing practice change and assist in increasing the social capital of the participating landholders and in turn the social resilience. This paper will outline the process that the Western CMA undertook in implementing the program and explore the key elements of the program design. Discussions with mentees will also be used to form examples of the enterprise change and development being undertaken as a result of the program.

Introduction:

The idea of creating a Western Catchment Management Authority (CMA) mentorship program was originally developed by a Board member in late 2009. The framework was created from the experiences of the board member as a landholder and from his discussions with managers of existing mentoring groups in the agricultural sector. This framework was structured around identifying landholders from within the Western Catchment with sound natural resource management principles to mentor other landholders to support the process of identifying and implementing steps towards improved practice change on the mentee's enterprise. The program framework also identified the need to establish and empower a network of landholders living within the Catchment. In accepting and acknowledging the merit of this framework the Western CMA in turn recognised that the program could deliver extension in a fresh form of capacity building and that the increased socio-economic resilience of participating landholders may also have a positive effect on their natural resource management.

While the key principles of the program were recognised as being sound, the task of integrating the mentoring program into the Western CMA's extension model was not simple. The Western CMA had not previously conducted a mentoring program of this nature and the program would take a different approach to the training activities that are usually contracted out to providers. Investing in the program was a risk, as the mentors would be unproven in their ability to deliver on the program objectives and in remaining consistent with Western CMA best practice management principles. The process of integrating the program into the CMA's extension program began by identifying innovative landholders from within the Western Catchment to participate in a workshop to discuss the feasibility of the program framework. From this point the program design received further input that included feedback from landholders from across the Catchment, external consultants and CMA staff. Research

was also conducted to draw on evidence from other mentor programs that have been carried out in the agricultural sector.

Program delivery

In June 2011 the pilot year of the mentorship program was launched as “Western Innovators”. The pilot program involved three mentors partnered with mentees from six properties located across the eastern part of the Catchment. During the pilot program mentees have worked with their mentor to develop an enterprise development plan; which essentially provides direction and support to implement improved practices relating to grazing and business management. Along with the enterprise development plan there are also a number of elements which look to support the delivery of the program. These elements are outlined below with discussion surrounding their relevance to the program’s intention and delivery.

Enterprise Development Plan

At the beginning of the program each mentee is required to establish a series of goals that they wish to achieve on their property. Part of the mentor’s role is to assist in achieving these goals by providing support and guidance through a result of their own experiences. These goals form part of a larger ‘enterprise development plan’, a document which aims to bring together the business and enterprise ideas discussed by the mentee and mentor over the period of the program. Currently mentee landholders have the opportunity to receive funding to implement infrastructure works that will aid the improvement of their grazing management identified in their enterprise development plan. Projects identified in the plan may be a short-term goal or form part the mentee’s long term vision for their enterprise.

Program Pillars

The Western Innovators program is structured around a series of ‘pillars’ through which the mentor guides their mentee. The outline of these pillars was included in the original program framework and is intended to provide mentors with a point of reference to assist with their role. The pillars have received input from the Western CMA to form program objectives and to provide steps to assist mentees in achieving their identified goals for enterprise change and development. These pillars consist of:

1. Review current operation
2. Formulate business direction
3. Establish steps to achieve business objectives
4. Farm map
5. Systems development
6. Monitor, review and evaluate.

Program Network and Support

During the program induction period every effort is made to match the mentor and mentee on similar management techniques, interests and personality. In creating the mentoring partnership the Western CMA is aiming to provide mentee’s with relevant information for their specific requirements and in a manner that is not intimidating.

For many landholders, implementing enterprise management change is an overwhelming process. Often a land manager may have an idea to implement practice change but is hesitant to move forward with their plans. Given that enterprise change and development often requires a significant financial investment it is not difficult to understand a land manager’s

hesitance. By establishing the mentor/mentee partnership the aim is not to force a mentee into making these changes, but rather to establish a framework where they can openly and comfortably seek the advice and support required to make these challenging decisions.

The program network has been established by holding a number of get-togethers including a group induction and open days hosted by each of the mentors. These events provide program participants with the opportunity to meet and discuss innovative natural resource management in a social forum. The open days also provide an opportunity to see first-hand what the mentors have been able to achieve with their own enterprise.

One of the key successes of the program so far has been the network of landholders that it has established. The dynamic of the current participant network has enabled the group to openly discuss their issues and interests in a social forum. Program get-togethers have a positive atmosphere, lively discussion and often include the mentor and mentee's whole families.

By providing the forum participants are able to share ideas based on their own learning and practical experiences. This positive and forward thinking network is assisting in building the socio-economic resilience of the group and aiding the adaptation of sustainable land management practices. The benefits of such groups have been widely-evidenced by Landcare (Curtis: 2012) and the widespread networks of land managers that this program has established. Western Innovators aims to create similar results to Landcare in increased social capital and social resilience, but is targeted at land managers undertaking significant practice change in rangeland grazing enterprises.

Experiences from the landholders involved

Landholders involved in the pilot year of the Western Innovators program have varied management experience and in the amount of time that they have been involved in their current grazing enterprise. Overall the program has appeared attractive to those who are relatively new to their current enterprise (under four years) as they have been provided with an extra set of experienced eyes to assist in developing a prioritised plan for their property.

One landholder has used the opportunity to maximise his business's potential by undertaking a change to his enterprise, in this circumstance a change in the type and number of livestock run on his property. His mentor, who has already successfully transformed a traditional grazing enterprise, provided the knowledge of business marketing and opportunities required to make this change. With the support of his mentor, the mentee has seen his plan for enterprise change come together and implemented more quickly than if he had tackled the change on his own.

For the remaining landholders, their twelve months has been focused on developing infrastructure on their property to allow them to graze livestock more effectively. For those relatively new to their property this has involved a process of identifying a long term vision and prioritising the steps required to achieve desired outcomes. As a part of their vision, all of the landholders have identified the need to implement rotational grazing on their property. In terms of infrastructure this will require significant improvements to water infrastructure and fencing. While this can be a daunting process the program has provided mentees with the exposure to a mentor who can provide the inspiration to what they want to achieve in the future.

Conclusion

In developing the Western Innovators program the Western CMA has provided landholders with a unique forum to learn from one another. The pilot year of the program has been successful in the relationships established and the positive experiences that this has produced. The key success of the program has been the network of landholders that it has established as this will provide landholders with the ongoing support required to continue implementing their enterprise development plans. This network looks set to expand further with a second year of the Western Innovators program set to commence by October 2012. The second year of the program will take a similar form as the pilot. Participants from the first year will be encouraged to remain involved, continuing to build the social capital and resilience of the group.

References

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