

Report of the Lower Hunter Community Advisory Group

Wallarobba
17th September 2014

Introduction

The first meeting of the Local Land Services Community Advisory Group (CAG) for the Lower Hunter was held at Wallarobba Hall on the 17 September. There were 22 members in attendance and 5 Board members.

The members were given an opportunity to get to know each other and work out various links to other members of the CAG. This was followed by a presentation about the Hunter LLS to help members understand the scope the activities the LLS gets involved in. The presentation will be provided to members.

The group provided feedback through facilitated groups on 4 topics:

1. Advice on Regional Strategic Plan
2. Briefing on District Delivery Plan
3. Service Delivery Priorities questionnaire
4. Regional Outlook newsletter

Key advice for the Regional Strategic Plan:

The group was asked to outline the outcomes they would like to see in 5 years and the services that LLS could provide to achieve that outcome.

Outcomes you would like to see:

- Improved business outcomes for agriculture including; marketing and local branding, promotion of good products, employment, education and expertise. Partner with groups such as MLA or other extension groups to achieve this.
- Protection of agricultural land in planning and maximizing the potential of existing and new land (post mines) along with improved management on small holdings. Planning should recognise conflicts between agriculture and urban areas and also mitigate impacts or environmental harm.
- Improved health of waterways and their habitat value, reduce contamination and control carp.
- Improved coordination and focus in pest and weed management with higher rate of control for pests and larger program areas.
- Improved monitoring of current diseases, pests and weeds and preparedness for new incursions with a tighter Act for pests and diseases.
- Have a broader rating base
- Increased focus on social and health aspects of the agriculture and aquaculture industries.

- Cooperative approach to research across beef and dairy sectors.
- Coordinate the approach to threats of worm resistance in cattle.
- Control salinity impacts on agriculture with NSW and Local Governments
- Water security and availability to be better understood and communicated.
- Coordination partnerships in emergency management to be increased
- Have a Lower Hunter Flood Mitigation scheme that is revised for climate change predications
- Coordinate better across Agencies.
- Deliver on the promises of Government
- Better networking across the region
- Use best practice in all parts of the LLS business and increase uptake of innovative practices.
- Have simple application processes that also have reduced paperwork for staff allowing more time with clients.

Key actions and services

- Development of the right partnerships for LLS to make the funding go further
- Increased emphasis on well trained staff delivering extension services
- Consult with people through rural and social groups and give access to all people.
- Allow opportunities to talk about all sorts of issues and develop optimistic forms of communication that focus on solutions
- Use the Board to lobby when needed
- Promote triple bottom line outcomes that 'an increase in production quality means and increase in profit which makes the community more resilient and can protect the environment better'.
- LLS should provide planning priorities for landuse conflicts.
- Research and develop the best information possible for the region
- Provide leadership in planning for climate change
- Have education resources and programs that support our delivery at all levels and especially new landholders
- Have a dedicated weeds extension officer
- Communicate effectively with our clients at a local scale and use the media to get our stories heard.
- Increased resources including staffing to the programs on the ground including biosecurity issues, practice change, weeds, rabbits,
- Have bottom up built processes to make sure they are simple

Key advice from District Delivery Plan (DDP):

The group were asked to comment on how well the projects reflected local needs and priorities, asked what was missing and identify partnerships.

What reflected local needs and your suggested improvements:

- Investment in the Dairy and Beef sector was seen to be a good thing, however the balance of investment should have been higher and more flexible in the beef sector to generate security for the cattle market but there could be joint projects across both sectors and promotion of local produce.
- Riparian works on banks and vegetation in all catchments is good but especially in the Williams, this still requires checking to see that weed management is undertaken.
- Local Government partnerships are important but partnerships need to be expanded to other Agencies including Planning.
- The Regional Landcare Facilitator Program is adding value.
- Cessnock Biodiversity Strategy is a good thing and does require LLS support
- Irrigation industry investment is good but investment in innovation and communication is important
- There is a need for engagement with Baiada Chicken factory about water entering Woodberry Swamp (Noting this is a project in the DDP)

- A focus on the Native Vegetation program is good, but it will need to keep pace with any legislative changes.
- The Lower Hunter Flood Mitigation is a good program but requires a review consistent with the Lower Hunter Flood Study, the flood awareness education program that supports the scheme is good and could be expanded to other collaborators.
- The community engagement program was seen as good but there appears to be a doubling up of the activities.

What did not reflect local needs well?

- There is a lack of a program for urban waterways and it should have a focus on innovation.
- Salinity in the Lower Hunter is not addressed, this was both riverine salinity from the salinity trading scheme and dryland salinity.
- The focus of weeds is needed to be shifted to weeds like Giant Parramatta Grass, Coolatai and Green Cestrum. The investment in African Olive control was considered as being too late. Weed investment needs to be longer term with allowances made for follow up in projects.
- There is a lack of projects with non-agricultural landholders such as power industry.
- There are too many programs with funding spread across them
- There should be more input to the Hunter Catchment Contribution (HCC) program

What was missing?

- There should be an increased focus on education including from HCC budget
- There should be investment on agricultural weeds
- There should be an overall increase in funding and budget but particularly invasive species budget for both plants and animals.
- HCC budget should address flooding concerns
- Legume pasture trials are missing.

What areas of conflicting advice came from the groups?

There was only one area where the groups gave conflicting advice which was Hexham and Kooragang projects, which some groups supported and some questioned. The main area of questioning was about the scale of the budgets but also questions about merit and roles played in Hexham. There was also a point about Hexham project impacts on the Hunter Wetland Centre.

What partnerships were identified?

Partnerships were identified for many activities including working more with industries, Government Departments, Local Government, Researchers, landholders, Regional weed groups.

Other items that were raised:

The projects are difficult to assess without context information.

Key advice on Regional Outlook Newsletter:

The group were asked what they liked about regional outlook, what suggestions they had for improvement and how they thought it should be distributed.

What you liked:

- The layout is good and covers all four pillars of LLS.
- You can identify the officer's faces in the stories.
- Outlook also covered a lot of the area.

Improvements you suggested:

- Use a clickable hyperlink table of contents to get you to the story you want.
- Have personal input from staff on stories
- Rivers issues need to be covered such as water quality

- Information on upcoming events should be included
- Report progress highlights against the DDP on projects and key milestones
- Link to the DPI seasonal conditions site
- Weed alerts and other issues should be highlighted
- Have consistent contacts for Beef, Dairy and Fisheries
- Have seasonal issues which give consistent info on weeds, water quality and pastures for that season
- Investigate if a newsletter can be generated per district.

How should it be distributed?

There was recognition that both email and hard copies should be available. The email copy should be short with links to additional stories. There should be a system in place to make sure people receiving it are getting the version they want and do not receive duplicates. There should be effort made to get it to a wider audience as it only goes to the email addresses we currently have.

Key advice on Service Delivery Priorities Questionnaire:

The group were asked what questions they would ask and why?

What you thought we should ask?

- The questions are better directed at the individual rather than at a district level as this is what directly affects them.
- Rank the list of issues for just the top 5
- Ask if people know who the LLS are and what they do then have a link to the LLS website to maps and information so that people can find out about LLS easily
- There should be a question on landuse planning and resource sharing i.e. in mining and agriculture or subdivision affects
- Add phone as the preferred choice for communication
- Add property manager to the list of words that describe who you are also it should clarify what kind of rate payer you are as there is confusion between Council, LLS rates and HCC rates
- Combine the tick boxes for 'access to incentive funds to address threats' and 'access to technical information and expertise to control pests'
- Wording of a question on page two needs to be looked at to remove 'you' to end at the word 'provide' as LLS provides service to all interested people not just landholders
- Include 'assist' instead of just 'access' as LSS assists landholders not just gives access to information

Other items that were raised

- The service delivery questions are too long and should be grouped around the four pillars
- Use a better term than 'surveillance' for example 'monitoring'

Next Steps

- The report from the CAG will be provided to the Board for their October meeting.
- At the next CAG meeting we will report on progress against the advice you have provided.
- Staff will act on the advice provided in each of the areas immediately after the Board has reviewed it.
- The next agenda will have items to discuss big issues raised such as weeds, HCC investment and Hexham and Kooragang.
- Future agendas will have room for development of partnership opportunities and the full range of functions that the CAG meets for.
- A draft agenda for the next meeting will be sent at the end of January for a CAG meeting on 18 February in the Lake Macquarie area.