

Hovells Creek Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)

Summary of results from PRA interviews and workshop – 24-26 October 2016

The Landholder Collab team recently spent three days in the area surrounding Hovells Creek interviewing landholders about their experiences with and perspectives on local cooperation and group activities. Four teams, each comprised of a project team member and a local LLS officer, conducted 29 interviews from the 24th-26th of October, 2016. While the teams were concentrated in the Wyangala, Hovells Creek, Frogmore and Reids Flat area, they also travelled as far west as Billimari, as far south as Boorowa, as far east as Crookwell and as far north as Neville, covering the greater Cowra region.

The landholders interviewed held a mix of small, medium and larger landholdings. The largest group (n=14) were those running large commercial farms involving cattle or sheep grazing on improved pastures and fodder crops, although some were also using native pastures. The next largest group were those with medium-sized landholdings (n=12) used for a mix of commercial and non-commercial activities (including retired farmers and those on stewardship payments). All of the small landholders (n=3) were classed as either non-commercial or semi-commercial. Some key groups that weren't represented in our interviews were absentee landholders, large non-commercial land managers (e.g. NPWS) and Indigenous land managers (although Orange Local Area Land Council was contacted).



The vast majority of landholders that were interviewed had been involved with either a current Landcare group such as Hovells Creek, Neville, Fullerton-Hadley or Peelwod, or a past group such as Frogmore. Of those interviewed, approximately 21 were current Landcare members and only 3 had never been involved with Landcare. Tree-planting was the most common Landcare-related activity cited by landholders, included as part of the Great Eastern Ranges initiative. Landholders also reported collaborating on nest box installations, weed and feral animal control and strategies through their local Landcare groups.



Apart from Landcare, a range of other past and present examples of collaboration were identified in this landscape. These included rural fire bridges such as Tarrant's Gap, where local members have hosted fire safety events involving large landholders, smaller hobby farmers and absentee landholders, a fertiliser cooperative where landholders bought bulk fertiliser to share costs, an organic production group using strata bylaws to negotiate organic restrictions and cross-property grazing on the outskirts of the greater Canowindra area. There were also many examples of informal collaborations with family members and neighbours around equipment sharing, grazing, weed control and feral pest control (e.g. pigs, foxes), although some neighbours were seen as more difficult to engage with.

The potential for further collaboration was identified around both conservation and production initiatives. Many landholders discussed habitat connectivity in the landscape and had future plans to obtain grants for tree plantings, while others discussed their interest in participating in the 'Rivers of Carbon' linkage projects with Greening Australia. Many also expressed the need for further collaboration around pest and weed management, especially kangaroos.

Production-related initiatives that were raised included collective branding and marketing of produce, as well as collective buying of inputs. The development of collectives around mobile chooks for rotational grazing and bee hives on farms was also discussed. Eco-tourism was identified by a number of interviewees as a potential income stream that would benefit from collaboration. Ideas included bird-watching in the Reids Flat and Grabine areas, cultural tourism around Neville, a farm visit and recreation trail in the Cowra/Hovells Creek/Wyangala Dam area and the use of a disused railway line as a mountain biking track. Target markets could include tourists who frequent Wyangala Dam and Canberra residents who attend farmers' markets, who could be connected to farmers through an annual 'meet the farms' market day around Boorowa.

Barriers to collaboration that were identified by the interviewees included lack of time and burnout, an individualistic mentality, key people dropping out, a lack of shared priorities/values with neighbours, exclusivity of groups, social dynamics and dominant landholders, a lack of contact with blockies, lack of trust and lack of reliable and fast telecommunications. Some of those who were not as keen on further collaboration were older farmers without a succession plan to continue farming.

The value of an online tool for locals to communicate on a landscape scale to identify opportunities for collaboration was recognised by nearly all interview participants. They identified that such a tool would be most useful for monitoring and benchmarking across the landscape, producing landscape-scale evidence for grant applications, engagement with blockies and absentee landholders, engagement with landholders who are time-poor or averse to joining groups, engagement with grey nomads seeking eco-tourism opportunities, bringing various apps together via one portal, and for adaptive project management and communication amongst project participants. Interviewees were prepared to pay for this sort of online tool if it proved to be valuable during a trial stage, however specified that it would need to be a simple tool as download speed and internet reliability was notoriously slow/non-existent in the Hovells Creek area.

We aim to use the results from this PRA, combined with the results from the earlier PRA in the Watershed Landcare area around Mudgee, to develop an online tool and models for collaboration to test with members of Watershed Landcare and Hovells Creek Landcare during Phase 2 of our project in 2017. Thanks to all the participants as well as Keith Hyde, Rosemary Hook and Gordon Refshauge from Hovells Creek Landcare and Mary Bonet from Great Eastern Ranges for assisting with participant recruitment for this study.

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