

Eyre Peninsula farmers join forces for dry future

SARAH JOHNSON

Eyre Peninsula farmers are set to adapt their farming practices to prepare for a hotter, drier future, says climate change consultant and farmer Cecilia Woolford.

As President of Greening Australia, Cecilia was encouraged to receive expressions of interest from 150 Eyre Peninsula farmers for a cohesive revegetation project that could see alley farming and carbon sinks established across the region.

“What this response shows is that although farmers may not like to use the term ‘climate change’, they’re prepared to adapt their farming practices for a hotter, drier future,” she said.

“From my point of view, the fact that so many farmers have said ‘we are interested in this’ shows they are thinking about the future in a different environmental sense.

“Although some may say it’s more about sustainability and food security, I no longer care what we call it, as long as we’re doing it.”

Greening Australia, Free Eyre and Canopy, a not-for-profit group that creates CO² offsets in bio-diverse re-vegetation, have combined forces to apply for a slice of the Federal Government’s Biodiversity Fund. The fund, which opened more than 12 months ago, will invest around \$946 million over six years to help land managers store carbon and enhance biodiversity.

The partners are seeking millions of dollars to help Eyre Peninsula farmers establish diverse plant species along fence lines, on large tracts of land and in belts within productive cropping land, like Mike and Tessa Wake’s tree farms.

Successful applicants are expected to be announced in March this year.

While Mike and Tessa’s initiative involved leasing land and carbon rights to a third party, this project would involve farmers committing land to biodiverse plantings, with the potential to trade stored carbon in years to come. It takes five years before trees are ready to be measured for the carbon market. “At that point, farmers can decide whether they want to aggregate and sell carbon,” said Cecilia.



EYRE PENINSULA FARMER AND CLIMATE CHANGE CONSULTANT CECILIA WOOLFORD.

“At the moment farmers are worried about locking away their farms, because once you go into a carbon mechanism you have to guarantee the trees will be there for 100 years as part of the Carbon Farming Initiative.

“One day, if we get some carbon credits out of it, that’s a bonus,” said Mike. “But I’m not doing it for that, I’m doing it to sustain the environment.”

“That’s quite a decision for most farmers. They’re worried it might reduce their land value, but in actual fact it will most probably enhance their land value. It’s very hard to think like this at the moment because there’s so much uncertainty about the carbon price and related issues. The National Policy makes one feel very

insecure about making such long-term decisions.

“The beauty of this project is that landholders can make a short-term decision that can give a long-term option.

“I think the farmers that are interested in this project are looking at it from a sustainability and diversity point of view, with a little light on the hill that says there might be a different future.

“For me, though, because I work in climate change and I accept what the science is telling me, I say this is the only way my farm will actually be in production in 20 years.

“On my farm I still see a near future where we’ll be able to plant food, or at least grow wool, but I believe there will be some return from carbon as well.”

Cecilia owns a 4,500 ha wheat farm and sheep stud at Barna, 30 kilometres east of Kimba. Her property backs onto the Lake

Gilles Conservation Park. If the Biodiversity Fund grant application is successful and her property is considered viable for the project, she aims to plant belts and carbon sinks on her property. A carbon sink is a large planting of trees and vegetation in one area, often a non-productive area of farming land.

“I’d like to do alley farming in the productive areas of my farm and one area that was cleared only recently and is less productive I would put back into a carbon sink,” she said.

“The whole idea is to continue to be as productive as possible. It’s not about taking agricultural land out of production; it’s about enhancing the use of the agricultural land and adding some diversity to the farming system for the future.”

While Elementree chose to plant only mallee on Mike Wake’s property and imported trees from WA, the proposed Greening Australia, Free Eyre and Canopy project would involve diverse plantings using seeds collected from local areas.

“We’ll take trees that have provenance in the area,” said Cecilia. “Greening Australia would come and build the seed bank from what exists already. And then, to have an adaptive response, we’d also take seeds from land about 100 kilometres north of here.”

Climate change scientists predict weather conditions on Eyre Peninsula to move 100 kilometres south with every one degree Celsius increase in temperature, Cecilia said. The purpose of planting seeds collected from areas north of Eyre Peninsula is to establish vegetation that is suited to the forecast climate of the region.

If the partners’ application is successful and funding is made available, Cecilia expects the project to begin with seed collection, land analysis and selection of planting sites later this year, with planting beginning in 2014.

Cecilia was surprised to see the significant number of farmers from less marginal areas in the 150 landholders interested in the project.

“I was expecting them to be based in

more marginal areas, but when we transposed where the expressions of interest came from on a map of Eyre Peninsula we found they’re right down each of the coastal areas; in the main farming districts. It was really interesting

“It shows that farmers are interested in new ways of increasing their sustainability and whilst they do that, they’re certainly making adaptive responses to the future’s climate.”

Mike Wake, who has been involved in driving the concept of a shareholder group applying for the Biodiversity Fund, hopes to commit two per cent of his land to the venture.

“It’s about taking country that’s problematic out of production,” he said. “It might be drift or salt country or it might be narrow nooks and crannies in a paddock.

“One day, if we get some carbon credits out of it, that’s a bonus,” said Mike. “But I’m not doing it for that. I’m doing it to sustain the environment. I think it’s got some legs.”



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