

Community Funding Programs - Successes or Failures An Evaluation of the Nutrient Control Incentive Scheme

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SUMMARY: In New South Wales, there are several funding programs operating to promote best practice in natural resource management. But what are the results? In early 1998, the first attempt at formally evaluating the NSW Nutrient Control Incentive Scheme was made by the Department of Land and Water Conservation (DLWC). The paper outlines the evaluation process and the Incentive Scheme, which provides incentive grants and technical advice to the NSW community via Landcare, Rivercare and other organisations. The evaluation highlighted that our major achievement was increasing the awareness of nutrient control issues, resulting in a change of attitude towards land and water management within the community. The evaluation confirmed the need for continued support for, and investment in, natural resource management incentive schemes.

THE MAIN POINTS OF THIS PAPER

- The incentive grants were fundamental in achieving successful community involvement.
- Field days and demonstration sites were considered the most important methods for facilitating learning and information sharing.
- Financial and time restrictions were barriers to adequate project development and implementation, with most groups underestimating the amount of work required.
- To achieve the complete benefits of evaluation, a program needs to ensure: a clearly defined need for program; base line data to establish benchmarks; and measurable objectives.

1. INTRODUCTION

Significant public and private funding is being invested in natural resource management across Australia. For this reason alone we need to learn from and understand our successes and our failures. Continued public support for, and investment in, natural resource management depends on our ability to demonstrate the achievements of rivercare, landcare and other community groups to the wider public (Woodhill and Robins 1998). At the same time we must face up to limitations of current efforts so that we can make improvements.

In New South Wales, there are several funding programs operating to promote best practice in natural resource management. But what are the results? Dealing with environmental degradation is a complex task and consequently, the monitoring and evaluating of funding programs can also be complex and at times difficult (Woodhill and Robins 1998). In early 1998, the first attempt at formally evaluating the NSW Nutrient Control Incentive Scheme was made by the NSW Department of Land and Water Conservation. With assistance from the consultant "Global Learning", a moderately simple process of evaluation was designed and successfully implemented. In this paper we aim to:

1. outline the steps we undertook in evaluating the NSW Nutrient Control Incentive Scheme, and through the authors' experiences, provide assistance to others with similar plans; and
2. provide the key results from the evaluation (successes and failures) that are transferable to other incentive schemes.

2. RELEVANCE OF EVALUATION

In a broad sense, evaluation is about looking back and making a judgement as to how well things have been done. It can be a formal process with very specific terms of reference, or, informal such as a general debrief or feedback process (Wadsworth 1991). In this respect and in terms of the life of a project or program, evaluation may occur at any stage. Integral to a successful evaluation is the availability of adequate monitoring data that demonstrate a projects/programs' progress (Wadsworth 1991; Broughton and Hampshire 1997; Woodhill and Robins 1998). Therefore, monitoring and evaluation go hand in hand and can be seen as basic and critical management tools that provide information about progress, impact of activities and outcomes. The extent to which these tools are built into the overall project plan, with adequate resource allocation, will have a bearing on the value of these processes.

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As a growing number of natural resource management programs are built around community involvement, so should monitoring and evaluation activities. Processes that facilitate active participation in evaluation not only assist with decision making, but also provide beneficial learning (Woodhill and Robins 1998). Where active participation occurs, a greater sense of ownership, control and influence over a project/program direction can be achieved. Although this is sound in principle, monitoring and evaluation activities are rare in the natural resource management area (ANAO 1997). Some factors that influence this relate to the perception that evaluation is only the responsibility of program administrators, evaluation is too hard and in most cases, comes as an after thought. For projects/programs to be effective, monitoring and evaluation need to be integrated into overall program design with its' implementation being motivated by an ethos that values learning, accountability and adoption to change.

There is a major trend toward low key, regular, internal evaluation processes that have a significant learning and strategic development purpose. This is relevant for small community based projects, State and Commonwealth level funding programs. Regular evaluation processes keep track of program outputs (for example, km's fenced, number and attendance at field days). Keeping track of outputs over time, in addition to specific environmental monitoring activities, helps to draw conclusions about program outcomes (for example, specific changes in environmental quality and farmers adopting practices on their farm). The purpose of the evaluation activities is to determine how, when and by whom the evaluation should be undertaken.

3. ABOUT THE INCENTIVE SCHEME

3.1 Overview

The Nutrient Control Incentive Scheme (Nutrient Control) was one of the several programs implemented in 1993 under the NSW Blue-Green Algal Management Program by the NSW Department of Land and Water Conservation. The Regional component of the project was closely linked with the NSW Rivercare Incentive Program, through joint application forms and sharing of staff. The main strategy was to provide incentive grants and technical advice to the NSW community via Landcare, Rivercare and other groups and organisations. The objectives of Nutrient Control were:

1. to raise the awareness of the need for nutrient control in the NSW community; and
2. to promote the implementation of best management practices that reduced the amount of nutrients entering streams.

Projects funded under Nutrient Control were primarily on-ground works, focused on reducing nutrient inputs into waterways from both point and non-point sources, as well as providing demonstration sites for community education on effective nutrient management practices.

Guidelines were developed to assist with formulating, assessing and ranking Nutrient Control projects. Projects were funded on a \$ for \$ basis and included:

- riparian management (fencing out livestock, revegetating, alternative stock water supply, stabilisation works);
- wetlands (rehabilitation, constructed wetlands and farm dam wetlands); and
- intensive agriculture waste management.

3.2 Administration

The regional component of Nutrient Control involved the appointment of Nutrient Control Officers in each DLWC region to implement Nutrient Control Works. Service Agreements between the regions and head office stated the responsibilities of the Nutrient Control Officer, which included:

1. identifying potential projects to be funded;
2. site inspections;
3. prioritising projects to be funded;
4. allocating funds;
5. monitoring and reporting project progress;
6. promoting nutrient control activities;
7. providing technical advice on nutrient control issues; and
8. integrating Nutrient Control with other natural resource management programs.

The responsibilities of the Nutrient Control Project Manager included: co-ordinating the regional staff and undertaking region visits; approving projects for funding; collating regional reports; and assisting with staff training.

4. THE EVALUATION PROCESS

Nutrient Control had been monitored since inception via quarterly and annual reports from each grant recipient. Reports were then collated into regional and Statewide reports. However, no formal evaluation of Nutrient Control had been undertaken. The project team wanted a summary of the achievements to date and lessons learnt (successes and failures) in order to make improvements to Nutrient Control and demonstrate our achievements.

The first step towards evaluating Nutrient Control was to find out what was needed to undertake an evaluation and what we wanted to know from our program. This was achieved by answering the following points:

- identifying the key issues facing the project and need for evaluation;
- purpose of evaluation;
- scope of evaluation;
- resources available for the evaluation; and
- main sources of information.

The above points were clarified through a workshop held with Nutrient Control Staff. Given the range of issues, the very tight time frame and the limited availability of staff, it was decided to establish a Steering Committee who would provide direction and advice to a consultant. Terms of Reference were designed around the points listed above and Global Learning was engaged to undertake the evaluation. This approach had the benefit of providing interested DLWC staff an opportunity to learn about the evaluation process.

The objectives of the evaluation were refined as follows, to:

1. assess the extent to which the objectives of the program have been met;
2. summarise key achievements of the program to date;
3. identify areas where the delivery of the program can be improved; and
4. identify areas of strategic development and integration with other programs.

The methodology used by Coupland (1998) in the evaluation included qualitative and quantitative processes. Most of the data collected was qualitative. The methodology focused on the extent to which best practice had been promoted and implemented. There was no attempt to quantify the reduction in nutrients as this was beyond the scope of the resources available.

The evaluation was conducted over two months and used three methods: research, workshops and surveys.

4.1 Research

DLWC provided materials to Global Learning to assist them with understanding the project and hence, undertaking the evaluation. The materials included details of projects funded, relevant reports and procedures, administration details and examples of promotional material.

4.2 Workshops

Two workshops were held in two DLWC regions. A total of 25 people participated including project recipients and staff from DLWC. The purpose of the workshops was to identify areas for program improvement, particularly with regard to building better partnerships and projects with community groups. The workshop agenda included discussions on:

- nutrient control issues;
- examples of effective and not so effective projects;
- project development and communication; and
- administration.

4.3 Surveys

Two telephone surveys were designed: a community/project recipient survey; and a Nutrient Control Officer/staff survey. The purpose of each

survey was to obtain information about the achievements and effectiveness of the Nutrient Control Incentive Scheme based on the project experience of each respondent.

The community/project recipient survey included questions on:

- project details;
- project development and achievements;
- assistance from DLWC;
- with hindsight, would the group change their approach?;
- importance of the Nutrient Control Incentive Scheme in achieving their goals; and
- techniques used to promote outcomes of project and influencing others.

The project officer/staff survey included questions on:

- employment details and main client group;
- understanding of the program objectives;
- main issues regarding nutrient control in the region and effective techniques;
- adequacy of projects dealing with nutrient issues;
- benefits and barriers when working with community organisations;
- administration and management; and
- significant achievements of program to date and improvements to the program.

A total of 25 community members were randomly selected and surveyed across the State. The majority were landholders, with several local council officers also taking part. This represented projects to the value of \$381,000 that involved approximately 450 people. Fourteen DLWC staff were interviewed, including head office staff, Nutrient Control Officers and their managers.

5. USEFULNESS OF EVALUATION

The evaluation was extremely useful in that it provided a summary of Nutrient Control, highlighted the achievements, the successful components and not-so-effective components of the Incentive Scheme. The evaluation also gave insight into the perceptions of the Scheme held by the community and DLWC staff; in some cases the community and DLWC perceptions differed. Extracts from Coupland (1998) are discussed below.

5.1 Nutrient Control Incentive Scheme Summary

The evaluation provided a summary of the project for each year Nutrient Control had been operating, which included: funding distribution; project categories; and staff allocation across regions. A total of \$1,529,390 was allocated to 207 projects across NSW over a five year period. Funds were mostly directed to incorporated community groups via Landcare or indirectly via local government and industry.

5.2 Highlighted Achievements

The evaluation highlighted the major achievements of Nutrient Control. The key message from the surveys and workshop was that Nutrient Control had increased awareness of nutrient control issues, resulting in a change of attitude towards land management within the community (Figure 1). This was reflected in the detailed understanding of nutrient issues within the community responses at the workshops and the survey results.

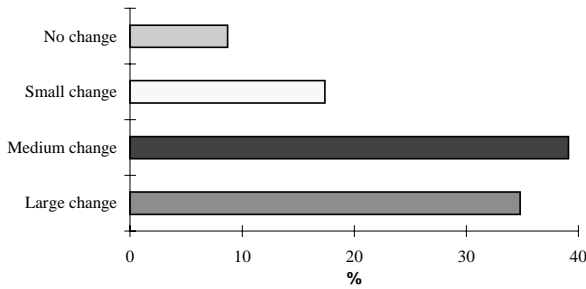


Figure 1: Community survey response to - the extent to which your knowledge about nutrient control has changed.

From the evaluation findings, the factors thought to contribute to the increase in knowledge included:

- improved cooperation between government and community, and increasing ownership of natural resource management issues at local levels. Where technical advice was provided by Nutrient Control Officers, 70 per cent of community respondents considered it adequate. In most cases the local Landcare Coordinator was important in supporting the groups in developing their project;
- the funds provided the means to undertake works that would, in most cases, not otherwise have been done. For example, the community survey results showed that 95 per cent of respondents considered the funds to be very important towards achieving project outcomes; and
- most survey respondents believe their project work has had a large to medium influence on others doing similar work (Figure 2). Where projects have been part of a landcare group, the benefits are rapidly shared and often similar work was undertaken on neighbouring properties. In one case, a dairy management project funded by Nutrient Control led to the development of seven more successful projects on neighbouring properties.

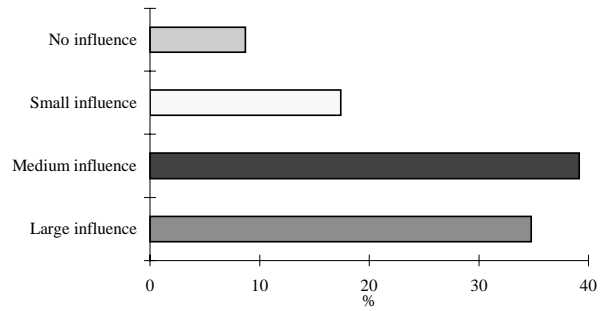


Figure 2: The degree of influence projects had on others to do similar work.

5.3 Approaches That Worked Well

5.3.1 Incentive grants

Community ownership of natural resource problems is one of the key principles in providing incentive grants to undertake work. In mirror image, those grant recipients that participated in the survey and workshop, considered the availability of grant funds the fundamental incentive for undertaking further works. The evaluation found that the value of work undertaken as a result of an incentive grant was often much greater than anticipated. For example one interviewee commented, “the Landcare Group spent \$76,000 on the project over three years with only \$9,700 being government (Nutrient Control) funding”.

5.3.2 Government support and effective communication

The approach that government officers have towards community groups has a large bearing on the degree of community involvement. Effective communication was seen as the key component to successfully involving the community. Workshop participants were asked their views on the best ways to communicate with community members.

The results are summarised as follows:

- a softly softly approach to canvassing participation;
- honest and frank, face to face interaction;
- deliver what is promised;
- concise written and verbal communication;
- do not overload information as it can be confusing;
- integration with other departmental services to reduce overlap and miss-communication; and
- involve schools, Catchment Management Committees and other community networks.

5.3.3 Field days and demonstration sites

Field days and practical demonstration sites were considered the most important methods for facilitating learning and information sharing (Figure 3). This is particularly the case where practical outcomes were communicated through landcare or industry.

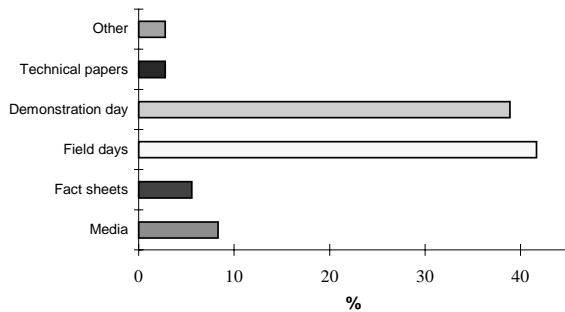


Figure 3: Preferred ways of communication.

5.3.4 Application form

Most of the community respondents (88 per cent) found the application form easy to fill in (NSW State Rivercare application form) as opposed to the Natural Heritage Trust application form.

Workshop discussions suggested the assessment of funding applications should consider the following characteristics to facilitate effective projects:

- how the project would enhance the natural environment;
- co-operation within the group;
- opportunity to learn from successes and failures;
- sound project management;
- catalyst for further works; and
- the availability of technical support (if needed).

5.4 Limitations of the Incentive Scheme

Much has been learned about the development and management of effective projects. Both workshop and survey participants were asked to consider the barriers to effective project management. Several key themes emerged:

- communication between landholders, DLWC, other agencies and authorities was highlighted as a constant struggle in respect to funding opportunities, technical information, government approvals, progress reporting and communicating project outcomes;
- most project participants underestimated the amount of work required, finding it hard to strike a balance between spending adequate time on project planning, reporting and project implementation;
- often funding was not received when expected, leading to works being postponed; and
- where a Nutrient Control Officer's role was shared with other programs, there was less satisfaction reported. The Nutrient Control Officer found it

difficult to juggle between programs and consequently felt less effective.

Perhaps the most significant issue identified by both the community participants and staff was the frustrations in the overall administration and coordination of project communication. Over the past year, funding administration and reporting was centralised in NSW; fundamentally de-personalising the program. Consequently, the communication between the grant recipient and Nutrient Control Officer was reduced and became confused. In many cases, the project officers were kept out of the information loop as the Funding Branch failed to give essential information and feed back.

5.5 Insights

The evaluation revealed some insights into to how the community and staff perceived the program outcomes and provided some surprises. Some examples are given below.

Community survey participants were asked if there were any surprises in developing and implementing their projects. In many cases, people were surprised at how much the community got behind the project once it got started, with involvement in actual work exceeding expectations. Many people were also surprised at the short term environmental outcomes from works, for example, the speed at which the land recovered when stock were excluded from riparian zones.

Quarterly reporting on project expenditure and progress was seen as important by both grant recipients and staff, for several reasons, including: to keep work on track; justify spending; and demonstrate progress. The community support for project reporting to DLWC was a surprise, as the Nutrient Control Officers have often experienced difficulty in retrieving reports from grant recipients. As one staff member said, "extracting reports from the groups is like extracting teeth from a horse".

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Funding Program

The evaluation generated many insights into the effectiveness of the program and highlighted where improvements are needed. The following extracts from (Coupland, 1998) may also be useful to other programs:

- ensure projects have appropriate mechanisms (field days and demonstration sites) to inform other community members about progress, learning and achievements;
- review staff situation to ensure that appropriate management and training support is provided;
- provide adequate information to staff and community groups on: appropriate project costings; procedures to work on public land; hints on obtaining resources; and technical knowledge to undertake work;

- ensure flexibility with respect to the real financial and time restrictions encountered by community members;
- provide training and support to Landcare Coordinators to raise their awareness of the resources available to landholders;
- ensure program activities are aligned with other agency initiatives to reduce duplication and confusion; and
- ensure frequent face to face communication between project officers and the community.

6.2 Evaluation

Evaluation as a management tool offers a sound process to account for public funds in addition to providing a rigorous process of learning. Both of these benefits are important to the development and implementation of natural resource management programs. For these benefits to be achieved, a program needs to ensure:

- the aims and objectives of the program are based on a clearly defined need for the program defined through research or evaluation processes. In this respect, evaluation occurs at the start of a program and will generate benchmarking information from which progress and outcomes can be evaluated;
- program objectives are coherent with a logical and achievable connection between each. Specific and measurable objectives linked to clear strategies and performance measures will ensure progress and outcomes can be evaluated;
- motivated, interested and well trained staff and other stakeholders are available to ensure evaluation is adequately incorporated into regular project activities; and
- adequate resources are allocated to ensure evaluation activities can be built into the overall program.

7. CONCLUSION

The evaluation showed the importance of providing incentive funds to the community in order to implement practical on-ground works. The increased amounts of project activity led to an increased awareness of the program and nutrient issues in many communities. The availability of Nutrient Control Officers and Landcare Coordinators influenced the level of project activity.

Evaluation as a management tool offers a sound process to account for public funds in addition to providing a rigorous process of learning. The methodology followed, although moderately simple, could have been improved with measurable objectives, through the establishment of benchmarks before commencing the Incentive Scheme and adequate resources to build evaluation activities into the overall program. Leaving the evaluation towards the end of the Nutrient Control

Incentive Scheme limited the opportunities inherent in the evaluation process. Despite this, the evaluation confirmed the need for continued support for, and investment in, natural resource management incentive schemes.

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