Wetlands benefit from decision-making framework

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ABOVE: A rigorous process of community and stakeholder engagement has seen successful outcomes for wetland assets in north-central Victoria. (Photo: NCCMA)

The innovative *Investment Framework for Environmental Resources* (INFFER) project looks to have secured the rehabilitation and protection of more than 3500 hectares of wetlands in the York Plains of north-central Victoria.

North Central Catchment Management Authority (NCCMA) CEO Damian Wells describes the result not only as exciting for the communities involved, but ground breaking in terms of how the resources will be managed.

"Through *INFFER* we been able to protect these significant wetlands by dramatically changing the way private landholders are paid to manage their land," Damian said.

"We don't always know what is on private land while we have excellent data on public land environmental assets, so INFFER has allowed help us break through this barrier."

INFFER project leader Dr Anna Roberts (Department of Primary Industries Victoria) explains the project is unique in the way it helps communities and environmental management bodies identify, develop and prioritise projects to address environmental issues such as water quality, biodiversity, environmental pests and land degradation.

"*INFFER* delivers a generic process that can be applied across all land tenures," Dr Roberts suggested.

"Through a step-by-step process, *INFFER* aims to achieve the most valuable environmental outcomes with the available resources.

"There is plenty of room for improvement for investment decision making about the environment and *INFFER* provides a comprehensive cost:benefit analysis to help CMAs or public decision makers make a better decision about how to get the best bang for their environmental buck.

"It is a highly-structured process that has been trialled by 20 out of 56 catchment management groups looking to identify and assess their options to manage natural resources of environmental and cultural significance (see Table 1)."

A solid business case

Geoff Park, Knowledge Broker with the NCCMA, has worked closely as part of the *INFFER* team to make sure *INFFER* can be used by regional groups.

He believes the greatest benefit *INFFER* offers is its ability to provide a sound business case with which communities can attract funding and investment. The York Plains wetlands is a perfect case in point.

"York Plains is particularly interesting because it wasn't really recognised as being an important environmental resource by the State, given it's predominant ownership by private landholders," Geoff said.

"However, it was identified by the community, and then valued against other assets and found to be extremely important within the whole catchment."

In the York Plains scenario, *INFFER* allowed the NCCMA to engage with community stakeholders and environmental management experts to identify a list of significant assets in the region.

"In developing such a list, *INFFER* requires you to be spatially explicit; assets need to be tangible and identifiable on a map," Geoff explained.

"When we ran this process across the region, we came up with 300 assets.

"Obviously there are not enough financial and management resources to go around all these assets and the beauty of *INFFER* is that

(i) key points

- **INFFER is allowing communities to identify locally-significant and threatened natural resource assets and develop sound business cases for their future protection and management**

- **In the York Plains of north-central Victoria INFFER has been instrumental in developing feasible solutions to manage a community-valued and significantly-threatened wetland managed in the main by private landholders**

- **Through a step-by-step process INFFER enables calculation of a cost:benefit index, maximising the return on environmental dollars invested.**

Table 1 Current adoption status of *INFFER* across regional groups Australia-wide	
Stage of *INFFER* adoption	Number of regional groups
Full adoption	2
Committed but early days	7
Positive trial	10
Trialled but not continuing	3
Source: *INFFER*	

it allows us to compare the cost effectiveness across those assets and identify where the best investment can be made.

"The tool allows the CMA and community to build the business case for what would be required to protect each asset and the associated cost."

In the case of the York Plains wetland, Geoff believes *INFFER* was integral in determining the appropriate action.

"The key thing *INFFER* does is to look at technical feasibility — do we have management options, are we confident it will work?" he said.

"In this case, it was about removing grazing and managing weeds and increasing perennial vegetation.

"Because 85 per cent of the wetlands are on private land, the involvement of the landholders was integral to the project's success."

"The outcome is that there has been significant financial support provided to landholders through the Victorian Government and the CMA."

With an initial lack of awareness by the state government, *INFFER* was instrumental in providing a transparent and rigorous analysis of all of the things from values through to threat, feasibility and costs, and what would be required.

"The business case developed by the NCCMA through the support offered by *INFFER* was crucial to getting the Victorian Government on board," Geoff explained.

A long-term commitment

As Damian Wells explains, the York Plains project is a story of a 4–5 year commitment from the CMA to work directly with landholders.

"You cannot get a York Plains result overnight," he said.

"It takes time to build trust, understand the people you are working with and what motivates them."

"Our approach at York Plains aims to achieve a genuinely enduring environmental protection result through the use of covenants, which are added to the land title in perpetuity.

"This project demonstrates that as we get increasingly targeted with asset protection

projects, we better realise the true cost of achieving enduring protection in what are primarily farming landscapes.

"In this case it involves paying the landholders the opportunity cost of making a farming system change and the direct costs of the protection work such as fencing, revegetation and weed control."

Damian points out that understanding the demographics and economics of the landscape in which you are working is critical.

"The York Plains solution must be viewed in the context of the landholders running genuine farming businesses," Damian explained.

"*INFFER* forces the discipline of understanding the public and private benefits associated with asset protection projects, which inherently directs you toward the most appropriate intervention.

"In 'tree-change' landscapes, *INFFER* is likely to direct you to use an alternative approach to what has been applied in York Plains."

The York Plains project also enjoyed Victorian Government funding during this period. Support like this provides authorities such as the NCCMA the confidence to make promises to landholders that they can keep.

"This is critical because changes in investor preferences can undermine the confidence of the landholders you are working with," Damian explained.

"You have to be able to make funding commitments to landholders over a period of years.

"In the case of the York Plains, it looks like we have got the right balance of science, community and government input to get an enduring environmental protection result for these key wetlands."

➥ **More information**

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How *INFFER* works

Through a step-by-step questioning process, *INFFER* helps communities identify what they are trying to protect, the environmental goals and with the information supplied, *INFFER* determines what is feasible and required to achieve the identified goals. Most importantly, it identifies how much will it cost.

"The way *INFFER* integrates information is to calculate a cost:benefit index, masterminded by Prof. David Pannell (University of Western Australia), which is similar to a cost:benefit analysis," Dr Anna Roberts explained.

According to Dr Roberts, there are eight keys ways *INFFER* adds value to environmental decision-making:

1. Provides a strong basis for a business case for future funding from state and national sources

2. Highlights that budget amount and longevity is a crucial determinant of the optimal management strategy

3. Provides confidence about using public money more cost-effectively through the choice of appropriate policy tools based on the public and private benefits they generate

4. Provides a robust, transparent basis to enable strategic direction setting, debate and discussion about the future of the assets in question

5. Builds on existing knowledge, integrating biological, physical, social and economic factors with institutional and political risks, and costs to assess the cost-effectiveness of actions

6. Helps highlight and prioritise limitations in current knowledge to inform decision-making

7. Provides internal consistency, ensuring actions funded by the project will be sufficient to deliver the stated goal

8. Helps to reduce bias in decision making by making the process fully transparent.

All the necessary documents (manuals, templates, examples, FAQs and other information) are freely available on the *INFFER* website at www.inffer.org