

A blueprint for change

A college of Australian scientists has charted a course for sustainable land management. **Wendy Pyper** seeks the wisdom of the Wentworth Group.

The dust storm that swept across eastern Australia in October 2002 delivered the plight of rural Australia to the doorsteps of Sydney and Melbourne.

For city dwellers yet to experience water restrictions and higher prices for fresh produce, the sight of seven million tonnes of topsoil en route to the Pacific Ocean was more compelling than hackneyed images of drought-ravished landscapes and farmers doing it tough.

Calls by some high-profile leaders to drought-proof Australia by turning coastal rivers inland received widespread publicity. So too did an eminent group of environmental scientists, with a warning that such a scheme would cause irreparable damage to Australia's environment.

'We need to learn to live with the landscape, not fight against it,' former chief executive of the CRC for Freshwater Ecology, Professor Peter Cullen, told reporters. 'Reversing rivers is a simplistic reaction to a complex set of problems.'

But the controversy has stimulated much-needed discussion. For too long, Australians have been seeing Australia through European eyes, and making management decisions for European landscapes. But the tide has begun to turn, through programs such as Landcare, and the efforts of individual landholders who have pioneered distinctively Australian approaches to sustainable land use.

In the spirit of this changing perception, and in response to the myth that Australia can be drought-proofed, 11 Australian environmental scientists have formed the Wentworth Group. Among the group's members are long-term advocates of land use change: CSIRO Land and Water chief, Dr John Williams; CSIRO Policy and Economic Research Unit director, Professor Mike Young; South Australian



CSIRO Land and Water

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Museum director, Professor Tim Flannery; and WWF Australia environmental policy specialist, Peter Cosier.

In November 2002, the group proposed common sense reforms designed to deliver sustainable agricultural and land management solutions.

'Rather than simply criticising the calls to drought-proof Australia, we felt it was incumbent upon us to show a better way forward, based on sound science,' Cosier says. 'So we developed the *Blueprint for a Living Continent*, to show Australia that there are affordable solutions. The solutions identified in the blueprint can be implemented by governments and will produce sustainable landscapes.'

The five areas for reform identified in the blueprint are:

- clarifying water property rights;
- restoring environmental flows;
- ending broadscale land-clearing;
- paying farmers for environmental services; and

- removing hidden environmental subsidies from the cost of food, fibre and water.

Importantly, these reforms build on core ideas established and developed through what the Wentworth Group calls three important 'foundations for change': Landcare, the Natural Heritage Trust, and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality.

'Over the past decade there have been profound changes in the way we think about Australia, and some great initiatives and ideas about managing our natural resources,' Cosier says.

'It's important to recognise that we're not starting with a blank piece of paper, and to give credit to the political leaders, farmers and landcarers, who are finding new ways to manage the Australian bush.'

More about the reforms

WWF Australia (2002) *Blueprint for a Living Continent. A way forward from the Wentworth Group of concerned scientists.*