



Dave Pannell (centre with sunglasses) says landholders will adopt a conservation practice when they perceive it will enhance the achievement of their personal goals, not just because someone tells them it is a good idea. *Eloise Seymour*

On-farm conservation: get farmers on side first

Policy makers, extension officers and researchers may have more success in getting farmers to adopt conservation practices by identifying the factors that motivate farmers first, before formulating policy or design extension programs.

Professor David Pannell of the University of Western Australia, one of the authors of a recent review paper on the subject, says conservation practices such as lime application to treat acid soils are more readily adopted by farmers because they provide tangible and measurable benefits. By contrast, some measures to counter dryland salinity can be difficult to trial and less attractive than current practices.

‘For policy people, we encourage a reality check,’ Pannell told *Ecos*. ‘We’re saying to them it’s not just a matter of

telling landholders what you think they ought to be doing, it’s almost the other way around. It’s recognising that farmers will do what they think will meet their goals ... and we need to account for that when we develop our policies.’

‘Profit or economics is an important motivation or driver for commercial farmers, but it’s not the be all and end all,’ said Pannell. ‘Cultural or social issues and personality traits of farmers are also relevant.’

The paper advises that if authorities wish to increase on-farm adoption, they should avoid putting all their efforts into communication, education and persuasion – the usual strategy – because unless the innovations being promoted are at least as attractive as the practices they are

supposed to replace, such extension programs are destined to fail.

‘We want to encourage scientists and others to understand what drives landholders so that their work to help farmers or improve the environment can be more effective, and can avoid dead ends,’ said Pannell.

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Pannell and his co-authors point out that if farmers are not responding, they generally have a good reason – for example, the time, money and energy required by new practices. During crises such as the current drought, farmers are unlikely to have enough of these resources to take on new challenges.

The paper also encourages scientists to involve landholders in their research, and to look at what the landholders are already doing on their land.

Pannell is now working with Roger Wilkinson of the Department of Primary Industries on a two-year project looking at the growing number of lifestyle farmers on small holdings in the North Central region of Victoria. The researchers are collaborating with the North Central Catchment Management Authority (NCCMA).

‘They [NCCMA] are unclear about the best way to interact with such landholders and to what approach they would be most responsive,’ said Pannell. ‘With luck, we should have some useful results within a year or so.’

● Steve Davidson

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More information:

Pannell DJ, Marshall GR, Barr N, Curtis A, Vancley F and Wilkinson R (2006). Understanding and promoting adoption of conservation practices by rural landholders. *Australian Journal of Experimental Agriculture* 46, 1407–1424.