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.

‘Profit or economics is an important motivation or driver for commercial farmers, but it’s not the be all and end all,’ said Pannell.

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.’

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