



New **directions** in sustainability planning

An innovative approach to regional planning in central Queensland is helping to promote sustainability across a broad cross-section of the rural community. According to participants, the approach is creating an unprecedented level of cooperation between often-conflicting sectors, offering hope that tensions can be replaced by constructive collaboration.

The Queensland Central Highlands exhibits symptoms of discontent common to many of the country's rural areas, brought about by changes largely outside the control of individual producers. Adding to tensions are a number of social and environmental issues, including land-clearing, native title issues, soil degradation, pests and weeds.

Planners are starting to realise that the introduction of sustainability concepts in an atmosphere of discontent requires a coordinated, collaborative approach. With this in mind, CSIRO Tropical Agriculture brought together a broad group of regional stakeholders, including various shires, several Queensland government departments, Central Queensland University and others to implement a regional planning project with a difference. Funded by the Land and Water Resources Research and Development Corporation and the Queensland Government, the project has three aims: to support the major sectors in the region to build the capacity to plan for sustainability; to bring sectors and interest groups together in a structured way; and to help improve the way in which government delivers its services.

According to the project leader, CSIRO Tropical Agriculture's Allan Dale, one of the key innovations is to help build 'capacity' within the regional community.

'Many attempts at regional planning have failed because people don't pay attention to the system of planning. This means they don't look at the capacity of groups to carry out their own planning and don't encourage negotiation among major stakeholders,' he says. 'For these reasons, plan implementation usually falls in a heap and there is little adoption.'

Since it began in mid 1997, the project has attracted overwhelming support from such disparate groups as the pastoral, grains and mining industries, Aboriginal communities, the conservation and human services sectors, catchment and landcare groups, and state and local governments. Collectively, these groups have formed a regional coordination committee to explore solutions to issues where there is substantial agreement between stakeholders.

According to Paul Bell, the Mayor of Emerald shire, the project is proving a unifying force in the region. 'It is helping us focus on issues that are normally outside the local government area,' he says. 'We are becoming involved in more strategic, bigger picture issues, like sustainability.'

Bell says the local government sector is now looking at regional cooperation and sharing regional assets as a way of making management more efficient and effective. For example, the five shires involved in the project have developed a regional pest management plan, enabling the problem to be tackled in a strategic way.

Another spin-off from the project is the formation of the Central Highland Information and Environment Network (CHIEN), an informal network involving the environment sector and other sectors and individuals interested in sustainability in the region.



The capacity of Queensland's Central Highlands region to address issues of sustainability has been enhanced through a cooperative planning process that involves a broad cross-section of the community including producers, government departments and resource management authorities.

Central highlands grazier Bood Hickson says that although the network has no formal role, it acts as a catalyst within the project to enable a much wider group of people to discuss issues.

'CHIEN is a big asset to the project by taking the discussion into the community,' he says. 'Any interest group can participate. The other day we had 50 people at a meeting talking about community input to national parks. It is creating a dialogue in the community.'

Despite the short time the project has been operation, it has already been a catalyst for major investments into the region in internet access, regional information, vegetation incentives, pest management and environmental monitoring. Dale expects that when the project finishes in mid 2001, the formal planning part of it will no longer be needed.

'The whole idea is to do ourselves out of a job. We feel pretty confident that by the end of the project the sectors will be committed to continuing the collaborative planning work they have commenced,' he says.

For more information, visit the project website at: <http://www.chris.tag.csiro.au>. Alan Dale can be contacted at CSIRO Tropical Agriculture on (07) 3214 2209, Alan.Dale@tag.csiro.au.