

## ‘Climate dogs’ get science across to farmers

Mary-Lou Considine

**What do sheep dogs have in common with Victoria’s erratic weather? A lot, as farm extension staff at the state’s Department of Primary Industries (DPI) discovered when faced with the challenge of communicating climate change science to farmers, many of whom are sceptical about climate change.**



Credit: DPI

The DPI team have created four animated ‘climate dog’ characters – based on typical farm dogs – to show farmers how Victoria’s four main climate drivers work to ‘round up’ or scatter storm clouds over the state.

‘When you visit a farm, you’re surrounded by sheep dogs,’ explains the DPI’s Mr Graeme Anderson. ‘In terms of behaviour, you never know which ones will be OK and which ones will come up and nip you. And, just like moving a mob of sheep, if the sheep dogs do the right thing, the farmer will have a good day. But if the dogs do the wrong thing, they’ll scatter the mob everywhere.’

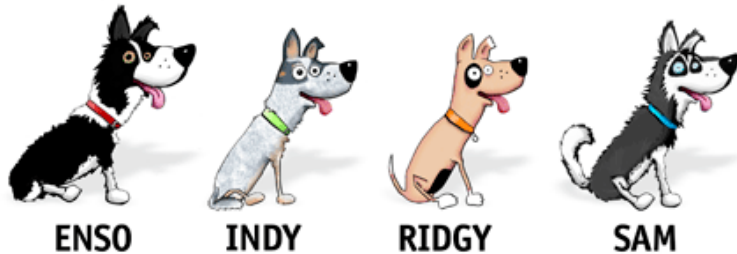
The DPI team worked with a Melbourne-based animator to create a series of short videos that illustrate how the behaviour of each climate system - represented as the dogs Enso, Indy, Sam and Ridgy - affects Victoria’s weather.

Enso represents the El Nino Southern Oscillation, the well-known cycle that results in moisture-laden Pacific trade winds blowing from South America towards Australia (La Nina) in some years, with the reverse (El Nino) causing drought in Australia at other times. The three other dogs represent the Indian Ocean Dipole (Indy), the Southern Annular Mode (Sam), and the Sub-tropical Ridge (Ridgy).

‘We took the approach [of cutting] it back to the essentials: what are each of these drivers doing to Victoria’s rainfall?’ says Mr Anderson.

Through an earlier survey of 1500 farmers, the DPI found only 30 per cent accepted the idea of human-induced global warming. The other 70 per cent were either uncertain or disagreed with the idea.

‘A lot of farmers are sceptical about climate change,’ says Mr Anderson. ‘There is good reason for this – climate change can threaten their hopes for the future, and in any case, it is climate variability that they have to contend with year in and year out.’



Credit: DPI

‘Our observation is that the language we use to communicate is important. We ask farmers not to get caught up in whether they believe in climate change or not. By showing them how to understand weather patterns, we can sidestep the whole debate and reframe the issue in a more practical space.’

‘In Victoria, we’ve got over 100 years of rainfall data for most locations, and farmers have rich knowledge and experience of local rainfall patterns. We use their existing knowledge and observations to link with the science – we call it “upscaling”.’

‘The farmers can see the link between their local weather and seasons and these larger-scale climate drivers, and are keen to find out more, so we sign them up for our monthly updates. Most are also fascinated by the story of Sam and Ridgy and how they influence us down south, and how these two are changing the way they behave in a warming world,’ Mr Anderson explains.

The DPI farm extension team is starting work on an emissions reduction information program that focuses on five key action areas:

1. trees on farms and agroforestry
2. soil health, carbon and organic matter
3. energy efficiency and generation opportunities
4. farm and soil nitrogen efficiency and loss reduction
5. reducing methane emissions and increasing livestock productivity.

‘Farmers are very practical and innovative,’ says Mr Anderson. ‘If we can tackle the issue of emissions reduction as a way for farmers to make practical cost savings and increase their farm productivity, rather than just framing it as a serious political issue, they are more likely to say “let’s just get on with it”.’

More information

DPI Climate Risk information page: [www.dpi.vic.gov.au/climaterisk](http://www.dpi.vic.gov.au/climaterisk)

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