Tarcutta Valley Landcare

Landcare Murrumbidgee

Tarcutta Valley Landcare Group Executive committee's report

Our valley catchment landholder's have recently benefited greatly from informative workshop events and on-ground works, for Landcare members especially and the general community at large. We note especially Peter Beal's management of the flood recovery project works (see page 6 of this newsletter).

This newsletter encapsulates the main Landcare activities and benefits of persistence in natural resource management however in 2014 - our and Landcare's 25th year - there appear to be a number of hurdles to negotiate to continue with our past vitality.

Firstly is the massive reduction in Federal funding for local and targeted activities. Secondly, the support from staff within the Local Land Services due to restructure transition measures, despite the quality of new and past employees. Finally, the succession plan of the Tarcutta Valley Landcare Group Executive, in which the Group requires new volunteers to help motivate Landcare in the Carabost, Humula, Borambola and Tarcutta catchments. We hope that this can continue to be achieved, with the immense support of the Murrumbidgee Landcare staff, and as part of the Riverina and Murray Local Land Services community structure.

Invitation to all land holders to get involved with Tarcutta Landcare!

Tarcutta Valley Landcare Group

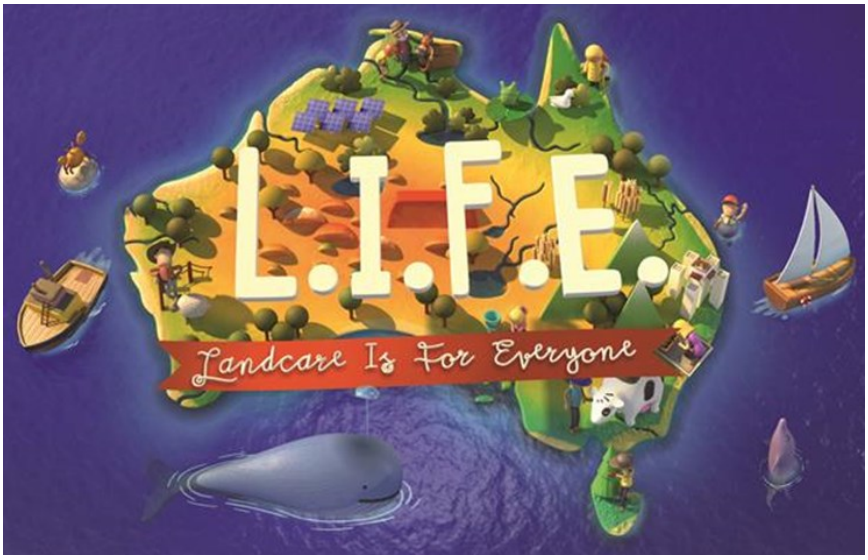
The Tarcutta Valley Landcare Group will be holding their AGM on Tuesday 17th June. All local community members are invited to attend the meeting, and find out how you can benefit from being a part of our active Group.

Benefits of being a Landcare member include:

- Access to group funding opportunities, to assist with works on your property;
- Initiations to attend free Landcare field days, workshops and social events;
- The chance to join with your neighbours, to share knowledge and work together to improve the sustainability and production capacity of your property;
- Regular updates on local events, opportunities and information relating to NRM and sustainable agriculture;
- Information and assistance from Murrumbidgee Landcare officers on things such as revegetation, weed/pest control, and sustainable agriculture; and
- Free access to the Landcare Library.

If you would like more information about being part of our Group, or would like to find out about how you can nominate for a position on the Executive, please contact:

- Peter McCallum (Treasurer, Tarcutta Valley Landcare Group: (02) 69 289 563, or
- Wendy Minato (Regional Landcare Facilitator, Murrumbidgee Landcare): wminato@mli.org.au, or 0487 953 777



Pasture cropping and regenerative agriculture

Colin Seis

The idea for pasture cropping

As Colin Seis tells the story, the idea for pasture cropping came to him during a conversation with his friend Daryl Cluff, while drinking beer one evening in 1993. Colin and Daryl were contemplating why crops and pastures were farmed separately. Their answer: tradition. They had been taught that pasture and crop systems operated by different ecological processes and were thus incompatible. Crops needed tilling and pastures needed animals. The systems could be alternated over the years, but never integrated. Right? Or wrong?

Colin raised the question because he had been watching the native grasses on his farm and began to wonder if nature didn't intend for annuals and perennials to coexist. Nature certainly wanted weeds in his pasture - so why not a different type of annual instead, such as oats? He knew why: weeds liked to run a 100 m sprint while perennial grasses like to a run a marathon. Two different races, two different types of athletes. Right? Or wrong?

What if it were just one race? What if grasses acted as a kind of cover crop for the annuals, keeping down the weeds but allowing the middle-distance runners, such as oats or barley or canola, to grow while the perennials waited for their turn on the racetrack? More to the point: what if you no-till drilled the perennial pasture during its dormant period with a cereal crop? As farmers, couldn't they figure out a way to make them all get along symbiotically? If nature could do it, why couldn't they?

That's when the light went on, Colin said, thanks to the beer. "You had to be drunk to think of something like pasture cropping. But once we sobered up the next day, we decided to give it a go." And give it a go they did.

So have many others. Today, pasture cropping is practiced by over 2,000 farms across Australia, and many more overseas. The idea continues to spread as well. Here are some reasons why:

- High crop yields
- Sustained high pasture and animal production from cropped land
- Increased fodder for livestock
- High rates of carbon biosequestration
- Marked improvement in the water-holding capacity of the soils
- Improved nutrient cycling
- Improvements in biodiversity and resilience even under drought stress
- Significantly reduced input costs and risks
- Improved economic return from the "vertical stacking" of enterprises
- Improved 'happiness' quotient on the farm.

It is this last point that is perhaps most important, Colin said. As a practice, pasture cropping is pretty straightforward: by growing an annual plant in the competitive niches in the root ecology of a perennial pasture, it avoids the need to kill pasture grasses prior to sowing a crop, thereby maintaining a living plant cover, which improves biological health of the soil and protects from wind and rain erosion. Plus, a farmer gets two products - crops and animals - from one piece of land.

But it is the social and emotional value of farming regeneratively, as Colin calls it, that matters most to him. To tell the story properly, we need to back up in time.

Above: In pasture cropping, grazing and cropping are combined and managed in a way where each one benefits the other. At left, the crop is shown being harvested, with emerging perennial grass beneath. At right, the native grassland is shown being grazed after the crop is harvested

(article continued from previous page)

A new farm

Colin's 840 ha family farm, "Winona", is located 20 km north of Gulgong in the central tablelands of NSW. Colin's grandfather resisted the industrial changes being pushed on Australian wheat farmers by agricultural companies and government agencies. His son, Harry, however decided to give something called "New Manure" a go, which turned out to be an early version of superphosphate, in an attempt to boost declining yields.

Trouble slowly escalated after Colin's father bought a tractor. He didn't know it, but his increased ploughing was depleting the soil, carbon especially. A vicious cycle ensued: less fertility in the soil meant more chemical inputs were needed to compensate. Then the farm began to fail. Costs kept rising, fertility kept falling, salinity rose, trees began to die - and they were going broke.

The farm ended up becoming dysfunctional and unprofitable. The granite soil on Winona had become compacted and acidic, and organic carbon levels had dropped to below 1.5 percent. The topsoil had declined to less than 100 mm deep and the subsoil had become sodic. Areas of salinity were also breaking out around the property.

Then in 1979, a wildfire burned almost all of Winona. Three thousand sheep died, all of the buildings were destroyed, 20 miles of fencing burned up, trees exploded, grass died, and Colin ended up in the hospital with burns on his body. "Worst of all, there was no money to recover things with, which means we had hit rock bottom" he explained. When Colin had recovered from his burns, he decided to rethink the way he had been practicing agriculture. The fire suddenly created an opportunity to create a new farm.

The move towards regenerative agriculture

The first step was to physically rebuild the farm, which took two years, with lots of help from neighbours. The second step was to go cold turkey on fertilizer, herbicides and pesticides, because they couldn't afford them. The pastures collapsed as a consequence - they were addicted to phosphorus, Colin said.

The third step was to research native grasses. Could they come back? Would they be an acceptable alternative? His father had battled against native grasses all his life, Colin said, and they kept returning despite his efforts at eradication. This raised a question in Colin's mind: if they keep wanting to come back, why not let them? Apparently, they want to be on the farm.

This led to the fourth step: study the holistic management ideas of Allan Savory, who had developed a way of managing animals on pasture that mimics the graze-and-go behaviour of wild herbivores. Colin resisted initially, but again felt that he had no choice. He quickly learned that it worked, however it created a long transitional period of low productivity, which reinforced his neighbours' belief that native grasses were not as productive as introduced ones. But Colin persisted with his plan.

By 1990, things had improved substantially, and Colin was seeing benefits both on the land and in his bank account. But he knew it wasn't enough to completely repair all the damage that Winona has endured over the years. He needed a new idea. That's where the beer came in. "Before industrialized agriculture was developed, the world's grasslands and farms contained hundreds of plant species of all sorts," Colin said. "And they functioned with very few problems like disease, insect attack and weeds because it was a balanced ecosystem. Pasture cropping returns that balance. It also creates good, rich soil with high carbon levels and good water-holding capacity."

Today, Colin and his son Nicholas run around 4,000 merino's on "Winona" and pasture crop around 200 ha annually in oats, wheat and cereal rye. Thanks to holistic management, pasture cropping, and other regenerative practices, "Winona" has left rock bottom far behind. So have Colin and his family.

Left: Colin Seis, co-inventor of pasture cropping and regenerative agriculture advocate

Acknowledgement

This article has been adapted with permission from a story by Courtney White which originally appeared in 'Acres' in July 2012. The complete story can be viewed online at Colin Seis' website, www.pasturecropping.com.

Come along to a free workshop with Colin Seis!

As part of the Cross Property Planning project, Colin Seis will be coming back to Humula in July to deliver a free, full-day workshop on pasture cropping (see page 5 of this newsletter for more info). If you are interested in learning more, please contact Jacinta Christie at Murrumbidgee Landcare: jchristie@mli.org.au, or 0431 953 778.

Preparing and planting a revegetation site: Tips for success

Greening Australia

The information below explains the steps involved in planting a site, from ground preparation and weed control through to planting tips and follow-up care. Good preparation and management can help minimise seedling losses and encourage healthy plant growth.

Ground preparation

Deep ripping soil helps root development, as it improves aeration and infiltration of water. This allows deeper penetration and faster growth of plant roots. Rip the planting lines to a depth of 40-60 cm or more if possible. Double ripping with rips 50-100 cm apart is very beneficial as it shatters the soil. On slopes, rip along contours to reduce erosion risk. On flatter sites, cross ripping on a grid layout will guard against roots growing in one direction along a single rip line (which can result in trees blowing over).

Ideally ripping should be done several months before planting, when the soil is fairly dry, to optimise the shattering effect. If the rip line is too loose or full of air pockets close to planting time, this can be remedied by driving a tractor tyre along it.

Trees should be planted between the rips. Where a single rip line is used, trees should be planted on the shoulder of the ripline, as trees planted in the bottom of the ripline can get waterlogged in winter.

Fencing

Fencing should be used to protect seedlings from stock for at least the first three years. Fencing also preserves the leaf litter at ground level, and protects low leafy shoots. All fencing should be completed before planting.

Controlling weeds

Poor weed control accounts for most planting failures, due to their competition for light, moisture and nutrients. Eliminate weeds early before they use up stored water – ideally, keeping the planting area free of weeds for a year or more prior to planting will ensure the best results.

If using chemical weed control, apply a knockdown herbicide well before planting, and then apply residual herbicide just before planting (in conjunction with a knockdown herbicide, if weeds have emerged since the first spray). Other techniques for weed control include moudboarding, cultivation, grazing and weed mats.

Selecting plants

Locally indigenous species are always recommended, as they are most suited to the local conditions and climate. Where possible, use seedlings from locally collected seed.

Spacing

Recommended spacing between seedlings varies depending on the location, but generally trees within a row and between the rows themselves can be spaced 3-5 m apart. Smaller trees and shrubs can be spaced 2-3 m apart.

Planting

Planting in autumn or winter takes advantage of the winter rains, and allows seedlings to establish slowly over the cooler months, enabling quick growth as soil temperatures warm up.

Seedlings should be given a good soaking in their pots the day before planting. In most situations, fertiliser is not necessary for native species. To plant tubestock, dig a hole slightly larger than the tubestock, then remove the seedling from the tube. Try to minimise root disturbance, however if a seedling is root-bound, the roots may need to be teased out. Place the seedling in the hole, so that the base of the seedling is just below the surface. Place the soil back around the hole, and firm down to collapse any air pockets and give good root to soil contact.

Watering

Ideally, time your planting with rainfall to avoid the need to water at planting time. If it is particularly dry, one litre of water (or more) poured slowly around each planted seedling will help overcome transplanting shock and remove air pockets. In most cases, no further watering should be required. However, it is always wise to check the seedlings over the months following planting to ensure they are surviving. If the summer is especially hot and dry, seedlings may benefit from watering; a litre per seedling should be sufficient, and watering should be limited to once a month at most, so as not to weaken the seedlings.

Guarding

Placing tree guards around your seedlings can help prevent grazing by rabbits, hares and kangaroos, helps protect the seedlings from winds and maintains a warm and moist environment around the seedlings. The most economical guards are milk cartons, which are held in by two bamboo stakes. Another common tree guard is the plastic sleeve, which is held in by three hard wood stakes.

Further information and acknowledgement

The information in this article has been provided by Greening Australia. For more detailed information on anything described here, visit the Greening Australia website at: www.greeningaustralia.org.au

Cross Property Planning project update

Jacinta Christie, Cross Property Project Manager, Murrumbidgee Landcare

The Cross Property Planning (CPP) project is still going strong, with 64 landholders involved across the Tarcutta/ Humula, Kyeamba and Illabo/Bethungra/Junee regions. Approximately 55% of landholder's involved have so far received funding to undertake work on their properties, in the areas of invasive species management, biodiverse plantings, and protection and enhancement of existing native vegetation remnants.

Hot and dry conditions over spring and summer last year meant that many of the landholder's who planted in 2013 had reduced survival rates. These landholder's have been supplied with additional funds through the project, to purchase replacement trees and shrubs this year.

FREE workshop!

The practicalities of pasture cropping

All interested community members are invited to this free workshop, looking at the practical steps of how to implement pasture cropping on your property.

Come along to learn from Colin Seis about how to actually incorporate pasture cropping into your farming system!

This workshop follows on from the introduction to pasture cropping workshop which was held at the end of April 2014 in Humula. All landholder's are welcome to attend (you don't need to have attended the previous workshop to come along).

Date: Tuesday 15th July 2014, 9.00 am to 4.00 pm

Venue: Humula Sports Club, Mate Street Humula (followed by a site visit in the afternoon)

RSVP: Please RSVP for catering purposes to Jacinta Christie by Thursday 10 July: 0431 953 778, or jchristie@mli.org.au.

Landholder's expectations, goals, practices and knowledge in relation to their native vegetation

Throughout mid-2013, thirty-five landholders involved in the CPP project were surveyed to gain a greater understanding of their current expectations, goals, practices and knowledge in relation to the management of their native vegetation. The survey covered nine areas: the farm operation, fertilisers and native pastures, natural resource management on farm, water sources, paddock trees and tree planting, pest animals that threaten production or biodiversity on farm, weed species that threaten production or biodiversity on farm, farm planning, and sources of information.

Results have been analysed and collated, with participating landholders provided with a copy of the report. Results from the survey will be discussed in coming editions of this newsletter. A full copy of the report is also available on the Murrumbidgee Landcare website, at: www.mli.org.au.

Encouraging beneficial insects by planting native vegetation

The CPP project is running a series of trials to look at the effect of replanting native vegetation on numbers of beneficial and harmful (pest) insects in adjacent agricultural paddocks. Beneficial insects are typically predators or parasites of pest insects, and can protect crops/pastures from damage by reducing the pest insect burden. Planting native vegetation increases habitat complexity, and may increase the abundance of beneficial insects in the surrounding area, meaning, revegetation may be a simple means of improving crop value.

To investigate the effect of native vegetation on beneficial and pest insects, a series of monitoring sites have been set up on six CPP member's properties, around the Bethungra/Illabo area. Each site consists of existing native vegetation adjacent to a crop or pasture paddock. Pitfall traps have been installed at each site to monitor ground dwelling species, such as beetles and spiders, whilst sticky traps are being used to monitor airborne species such as wasps and flies. Initial sampling has shown pest species to increase in abundance further into the crop, suggesting that the pest species are not able to survive as easily in the complex habitat of the native vegetation. All sites will continue to be sampled seasonally throughout 2014, and results will be included in future updates.

Pasture cropping and ecological agriculture workshop

On 30th April, over 40 landholder's headed to the Humula Club to take part in our workshop looking at alternatives to conventional grazing practices. Colin Seis spoke about how pasture cropping, native pastures and holistic management practices helped revitalise his property (see pages 2-3 of this newsletter). Vince Heffernan then spoke about his move towards organic and biodynamic agriculture on his family's grazing property. The group then headed out to David Tooke's property to have a look at some of the practical issues associated with the morning's workshop. Overall, the day generated a lot of discussion and interest, with the result that a follow-up workshop will be held (see information box on this page).

Above: Colin Seis and Vince Heffernan discuss pasture and grazing management at the CPP pasture cropping workshop

Riverina LLS completes flood recovery project works on Tarcutta Creek

Peter Beal, Riverina Local Land Services

Riverina Local Land Services, in conjunction with Wagga Wagga City Council and the Tarcutta Valley Landcare Group, have recently completed flood recovery works at six identified high risk sites.

Funding was provided by the NSW Government Action Plan and the Australian Government Caring for Our Country Flood Disaster Relief funding program.

Works consisted of cobblestone and gravel relocation, removal of exotic tree debris blockages and re-alignment of native tree logs for aquatic habitat recovery.

Works were completed by Divalls Bulk Haulage from Goulburn under contract and supervised by the works designers, consultants Jacobs SKM.

Local landholder, David Ham of "Nundi" Oberne Creek was amazed at the transformation of his creek bank, which was washing away constantly and threatening his prime lucerne paddocks (see photos, below).

A program of supplementary works to better control grazing along the creek will follow, along with revegetation by the Tarcutta Valley Landcare Group.

It is hoped that further funding assistance can be sourced to help protect this important catchment of the Murrumbidgee River.

Peter Beal, the Project Officer with the Riverina Local Land Services who is coordinating the flood recovery, is delighted with the end results of the works and the cooperation received from local landholders.

Before: Stream bank erosion from the 2012 flood event undercut a lucerne paddock on David Ham's property

After: The re-established bank of the Tarcutta Creek on David Ham's property, ready to be revegetated with the assistance of the Tarcutta Valley Landcare Group

Winter climate outlook for the Tarcutta Valley and region

Robbie Lennard, Wagga Bureau of Meteorology office

Temperatures: Winter days and nights are likely to be warmer than average, with around a 65% chance of maximum and minimum temperatures exceeding the median. For more information: www.bom.gov.au/climate/ahead/temp.seaus.shtml.

Rainfall: A drier than normal winter is likely, with around a 70% chance of rainfall being lower than the median winter rainfall. For more information: www.bom.gov.au/climate/ahead/rain.seaus.shtml.

El Niño: The tropical Pacific Ocean continues a general trend toward El Niño, with just over half of the climate models surveyed by the Bureau of Meteorology suggesting El Niño thresholds will be exceeded by August. An El Niño alert remains in place, indicating at least a 70% chance of an El Niño developing in 2014. For El Niño to be established and maintained, the sea surface needs to continue to warm, and be accompanied by a continuation in the persistent weakening of the trade winds and a consistent increase in cloudiness near the Date Line.

El Niño events are usually associated with below-average rainfall over our region, with the majority of El Niño's since 1900 causing major drought over much of Australia. For more information: www.bom.gov.au/climate/enso.

This seasonal outlook is based on data available in late May 2014. For further info, and regularly updated predictions, check out the Bureau of Meteorology seasonal outlook web pages provided.

Funding opportunities and RLF activity update

Wendy Minato, Regional Landcare Facilitator, Murrumbidgee Landcare

Funding opportunities available for Landcare Groups and members

The following is a summary of some of the current funding opportunities available to support Landcare Groups and members. For information and assistance on applying for any of these grants, please feel free to contact Wendy Minato at Murrumbidgee Landcare: wminato@mli.org.au, or 0487 953 777, or visit the Murrumbidgee Landcare website: www.mli.org.au.

- ***Funding to attend the National Landcare Conference***. The Regional Landcare Facilitator project is able to offer assistance for Landcare members to attend the National Landcare Conference and Awards in Melbourne on 17 - 19 September 2014 (see 'Coming Events' on the back page of this newsletter). Funding is available to cover the cost of registration and the National Landcare Awards dinner, with funding offered on a first-come, first-served basis. All funded attendees will be requested to submit a brief story about a topic of interest at the Conference.
- ***Funding for sustainable agriculture workshops/ activities***. Murrumbidgee Landcare is inviting applications from Landcare Groups for funding to support workshops, field days or other events and activities promoting Landcare and sustainable agricultural practices. Priority will be given to activities that focus on integrated weed management, or stock management to retain/ improve the quality of grazed native grasslands and improved native pasture systems. Funding can be used to cover workshop expenses, catering, promotion and educational materials for participants.
- ***Funding to support Landcare groups***. Murrumbidgee Landcare and the Regional Landcare Facilitator project have funding available to support Landcare Groups in their day-to-day activities. The funding is aimed at supporting Groups in natural resource management work, and could be used for things such as newsletters, events, guest speakers, tools and safety equipment. Grants of $500 to $1,500 are available, depending on need. Applications for greater amounts will be considered.
- ***Landcare Week Grow Grants 2014***. To celebrate Landcare Australia and 25 years of working with the Landcare community, 25 grants of up to $1,000 are available for Landcare Groups to support local Landcare week events that aim to increase the number of volunteers involved in Landcare. The Landcare Week Grow Event which the funding supports must be held during the month of September 2014. For more information, visit: www.landcareonline.com.au/25years
- ***RAA Special Conservation Scheme Loan***. Funding by way of a loan is available to carry out works that will have a significant beneficial impact on the land, the local community and the environment AND are not purely productivity based. Works can include soil conservation, woody weed control, control of noxious weeds, stock and domestic water supply, and planting of perennial species such as Lucerne. The Rural Financial Counselling Service specialises in helping landholders to access these loans. Their service is free and they will travel to you, wherever you are. Contact their main office on (02) 64 525 850 to find your nearest counsellor.

Activity update: Native Vegetation Code for clearing of paddock trees in cultivated areas

Riverina Local Land Services recently held field demonstration days for the draft Native Vegetation self-assessable codes of practice. I attended the field day on the draft Paddock Tree Code. This Code sets out the conditions and minimum requirements for clearing paddock trees within a cultivated area. The assessment involves proposed thresholds for trunk diameter, distance between trees, tree density, habitat features such as nests and hollows, and proximity to water. An additional consideration is the establishment of set aside areas that compensate for the loss of individual paddock trees.

The idea of the field day was to discuss the draft codes and comment on their perceived workability, before heading out into the paddock to see how practical self-assessment might be in reality. The short answer… not very!

For each technical threshold there were found to be ambiguities to do with species, growth habit and region - in other words, applying the Code is not a simple process, and would take a landholder time to become familiar with the complex rules and criteria. The unavailability of suitable set-aside areas would be a limiting factor on many properties, making it difficult to apply the Code. Furthermore, the Code does not take into account the relative value of large old paddock trees versus younger but more vibrant trees. There is no way of ensuring that set-aside areas will be protected into the future, and they will be difficult to keep track of for compliance if, for instance, a property is sold. And so on…

The discussion on the day was both informative and constructive. The overall consensus from a mix of landholders and agency staff was that the Code is significantly flawed and needs to be written to include flexibility at a regional level, at the very least.

The outcome from the Riverina LLS field days will be submissions to the Office of Environment about the Codes' applicability and ease of use.

Coming events

Tarcutta Valley Landcare Group meetings

All community members are welcome to attend our monthly Landcare group meetings. Meetings are held on the third Tuesday of the month, from 7.00 pm, at the Tarcutta RSL. All community members are welcome to attend!

Wildlife in our landscape: Are we making a difference?

Wednesday 18th June, 10 am to 2.30 pm, Holbrook Library complex. The Holbrook Landcare Network are presenting this workshop, featuring Professor David Lindenmeyer, talking about key lessons about revegetation on farms from the South West Slopes Restoration Study. Other topics to be covered include frogs on farms, squirrel gliders and reptiles. For more information or to RSVP, contact Holbrook Landcare: 60 363 181, or office@holbrooklandcare.org.au.

Graham Centre Sheep Forum

Friday 4th July, 9.00 am - 1.30 pm, Charles Sturt University Wagga. The forum will feature presentations on sheep nutrition, grazing management, business planning and a range of other topics. For more information, and to register ($25) visit: www.csu.edu.au/research/grahamcentre/field-day/sheep.htm

The practicalities of pasture cropping: Free workshop and field day

Tuesday 15th July, 9.00 am - 4.00 pm, Humula Club (morning session), followed by a local site visit in the afternoon. This free, practical workshop will provide information and advice for anyone who would like to know how to start implementing pasture cropping on their property. For more information, and to RSVP (by 10th July), please contact Jacinta Christie: 0431 953 778, or jchristie@mli.org.au

Grassland Society of NSW conference

July 22-24, Inverell. For more information: www.grasslandnsw.com.au/news/conference

National Landcare conference

September 17-19, Melbourne. The 2014 National Landcare Conference is based around the theme "Celebrating our history - growing our future". Presentations, workshops and field trips will be involved, around the topics of sustainable agriculture, environment, Landcare's history, community and volunteering, and embracing the future of Landcare. For more information: www.landcareonline.com.au/nationalconference

Graham Centre Beef Forum

Friday 15th August, Charles Sturt University Wagga. For more information, contact Toni Nugent: tnugent@csu.edu.au

Key contacts

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If you have any questions or comments about this newsletter, or would like to contribute any ideas, please contact Nicole Maher (Newsletter Editor):

nmaher@mli.org.au, or (02) 69 310 981.

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