

Spending salinity funding wisely

By Jill Griffiths

Australian governments have invested significant funds to help manage dryland salinity, but some of the investments made are not contributing greatly to salinity outcomes, according to researchers David Pannell and Anna Ridley.

Professor Pannell, from The University of Western Australia (UWA), and Dr Ridley, from DPI Victoria, are leading the *Salinity Investment Framework (SIF3)* project to find, investigating the best ways of allocating public funds to address dryland salinity.

Professor Pannell said when you look at the scale of change required to contain salinity, the current approach is not working.

"The budget for the national salinity program has been around \$200 million per year, but that is still small in relation to the scale of the problem," Professor Pannell said. "We know that effective containment of salinity requires major changes in land management, but given the current land-use options, that is a very expensive undertaking."

"Environmental managers can either spread their resources thinly and not achieve much, or do their best to pick winners."

Professor Pannell and Dr Ridley have developed *SIF3* to help identify likely 'winners'. The project attempts to base salinity investments more firmly on current research knowledge within a systematic, structured approach. It also encourages a more objective approach than is often applied.

The framework distinguishes between localised and dispersed assets. For localised assets it involves four elements:

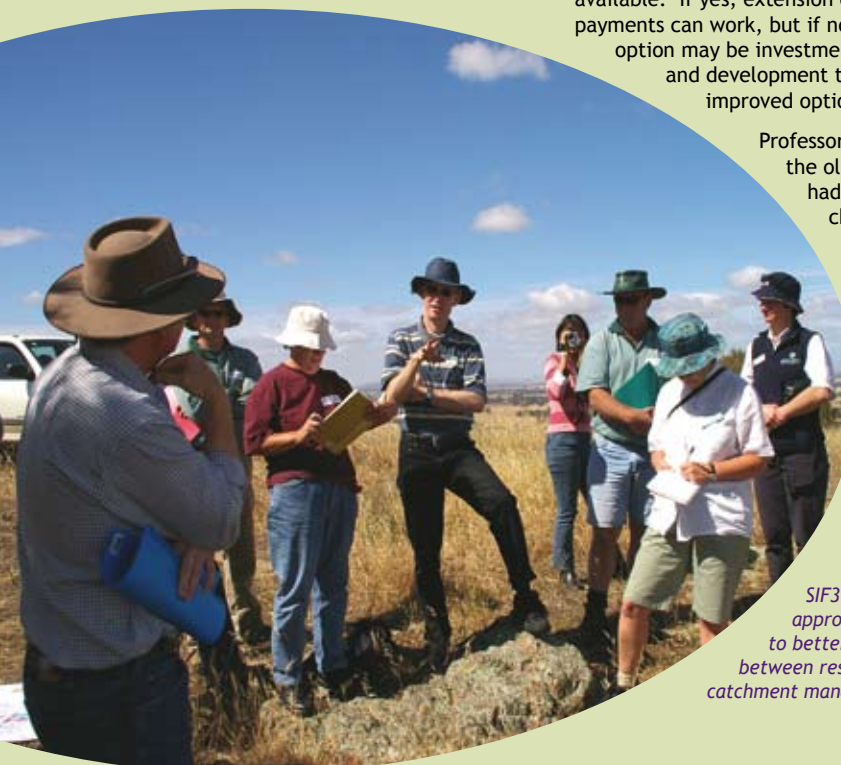
1. Identifying high-value natural resource assets
2. Identifying those assets that are particularly threatened
3. Establish whether something can actually be done to protect them
4. Assessing the likelihood of landholders adopting the practices that would be recommended.

"For localised assets, the targeting of funds needs to be tight," Professor Pannell said.

"For dispersed assets, such as agricultural land, the best approach depends on whether attractive land-management options are available. If yes, extension or incentive payments can work, but if not, the best option may be investment in research and development to create improved options."

Professor Pannell said the old approach had been useful in changing farmers' attitudes to the environment but had not

SIF3 has allowed an approach that has led to better partnerships between researchers and catchment managers.



led to many farmers planting perennials on the scale required to address salinity.

The shift to an asset-based approach would require catchment managers to ask what it will really take to protect a particular asset, is this approach feasible, and is it worth it?

Solutions may involve widespread vegetation, highly targeted vegetation, engineering, or a combination.

SIF3 has been successfully applied in the North Central region of Victoria, and in the South Coast region of WA. The researchers are planning to broaden it beyond salinity, to address multiple environmental issues, including biodiversity, water quality and environmental pests, within a new framework called Investment Framework for Environmental Resources (INFFER).

SIF3 has been jointly funded by the former CRC Salinity and the Cooperative Venture for Capacity Building (via RIRDC). Future work on INFFER and other environmental policy aspects is being funded by FFI CRC, the Department of Environment and Water Resources, and the Australian Research Council. ↴

More information

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