Working together

The System Harmonisation program within the CRC for Irrigation Futures recognises that irrigation is part of a changing complex social-ecological system that requires new approaches based on integrating science, policy, management and communities to deliver on long-term sustainability objectives. The program involves working with regional irrigation partners, including Western Sydney, to increase profitability and reduce the environmental footprint of improved irrigation systems. It is promoting interdisciplinary approaches to develop and implement strategies to improve cross-organisational communication and objective decision-making.

The program is dealing with the high risk ‘hard stuff’ that everyone says is needed but no one is doing! It is working at the interfaces; the socio-economic-ecological, surface water-groundwater, water quantity-quality, and the land-water interfaces. It recognises that the whole is more than the sum of the parts, and is dealing with the complexity and uncertainty of the system which includes irrigation. It is also helping organisations and communities question why things are being done the way they are, and encouraging new and different approaches to create a better future. The sorts of questions all communities, and in this particular case peri-urban communities are faced with include:

- Do we have the right policies and institutions in place?
- Are we using appropriate economic models that account for impacts on the environment to support long term decision making?
- If current trends in population, water demand and energy usage persist, where will we get our water and food from?
- Should we encourage more local food production through careful design of peri-urban zones that maintain ‘horticultural precincts’ within an overall mosaic structure?

System Harmonisation has highlighted that the core challenges faced by irrigation in particular and society in general cannot be solved in isolation. A systems approach and strong collaboration across a broad range of partners is needed. Experience shows that this is not easy, especially when many of our approaches to date have been based on ‘competition’. Collaboration by contrast requires a change in attitude, commitment and hard work, and takes time to build the necessary trust. Effective collaboration is about relationships based on genuine caring and mutual vulnerability. Collaboration is essential to help create a better future for all, including regions like Western Sydney.

The WISER project, which involves a growing number of regional, state and national partners who are working collaboratively to address current and future water needs, is to be commended for the commitment that has been demonstrated to date. The current task of evaluating and implementing alternative water supplies, including managed aquifer recharge and recovery, bodes well for the future of Western Sydney and Sydney as a whole.

Keith L. Bristow, Joint Program Leader, System Harmonisation

Chair’s message

Our ‘Alternative Water Supplies for Western Sydney’ workshop in April revealed the importance of maintaining strong stakeholder engagement. The practical focus of the workshop demonstrated that research must be useful for our immediate stakeholders and the community they represent.

The workshop’s success was three-fold: the solid research foundation WISER has achieved; the knowledge and credibility of the presenters; and the commitment of WISER Project partners who can now see real value in being part of the venture.

Thanks to the workshop, we are now also considering a new initiative that may significantly impact secure water supplies for irrigation in Western Sydney. This would not have been possible without the work of WISER researchers.

The WISER Project has united agencies in Western Sydney to address the major problem of long term water security, with all its collateral impact on quality of life, employment and catchment health. It makes all the effort worthwhile.

Kevin Rozzoli AM

Photo: Local prawn trawler operator
Gary Howard on the Hawkesbury River
Future farming

The NSW Department of Primary Industries plans to establish a new Agricultural Reference Group to encourage agricultural industry development and improve planning outcomes in the Sydney Region.

The reference group will also review recommendations from a forum held late last year into Sydney’s agriculture. The NSW DPI, working with Penrith City Council and the NSW Department of Planning, hosted the forum. Around 120 forum participants discussed how policy and strategy could be improved to ensure the long term viability of agriculture in Western Sydney.


David Mason
Office of the Hawkesbury Nepean

Above: Participants at the NSW DPI forum called ‘Sydney’s Agriculture - Planning for the Future’.

Water project

A new three-year project by the Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils (WESROC) will raise community awareness about regional water issues and involve local people in water management decisions.

The Water in the Landscapes Project will draw community attention to the impact of reduced water supplies on agriculture and food production, playing fields, waterways, civic spaces, parks, flora and fauna, household gardens and local businesses.

WESROC will hold a series of cultural activities across Western Sydney to focus on how water availability affects local economies, environments and social life.

A Water in Western Sydney Citizens’ Panel will be formed to distribute information, consult with the community and encourage people to publicly debate the supply and distribution of water in the region. Research will also be conducted into how the community values water through surveys and interviews.

The Landscapes in Water Project will also host regional Water Futures forums involving community members, political figures, media and water management professionals.

For more information on the project or to participate, please contact 02 9676 8267 or email Colin Berryman: colin@wsroc.com.au

Wisdom project in national perspective

WISE Project members Basant Maheshwari and Bruce Simmons recently made a presentation to the National Water Commission in Canberra. Titled ‘System Harmonisation: Peri-urban Experience of Water Cycle Management’, the presentation highlighted the complexity of peri-urban water cycle management and the tools that are being developed by the researchers in the WISER project. The WISER Project and its system harmonisation approach was well received by the commission. Comments about the presentation included the growing importance of the nexus between the urban and rural water use and management, the value of peri-urban irrigated agriculture/horticulture and the relevance of the WISER project to addressing peri-urban water issues.

Basant Maheshwari and Bruce Simmons

Part of the flow...

Jacky Williams

What do you do? I am a post-doctoral research fellow with the Australian Centre for Agriculture and Law at the University of New England, Armidale. I’m working with the CRC-IF on the social, cultural, institutional and policy aspects of System Harmonisation in Western Sydney and Macintyre Brook, Qld.

What are you passionate about? Regional natural resource management, the social/political facets of achieving sustainability, and the role sustainable agriculture plays in delivering public good ecosystem services in rural and peri-urban Australia.

Why are you involved in the WISER project? I am working on an ecosystem services framework for Western Sydney to facilitate an environmental markets approach. I’m also developing a policy risk manual in response to the institutional analysis we conducted of Western Sydney in 2007-08 as part of our SCIP research.

How do you plan to contribute to the WISER project? My contributions include an institutional analysis of Western Sydney, an ecosystem services framework for Western Sydney, and a Policy Risk Manual to assist in the scenario development phase of WISER.

What do you hope to get out of this? It’s an opportunity to share my knowledge and experience with WISER and meet people who are exploring the complexities involved in sustainability. It is a great experience to be involved in a project that is bridging the gap between theory and the real world.

WISE Research Partners: Universities of Western Sydney, New England, Melbourne; CSIRO Land & Water; NSW DPI, QLD DNRW

Editors: Suzie Vlaming & Basant Maheshwari