

## Building biodiversity, knowledge and partnerships in the Riverina

*Nicole Maher, Murrumbidgee Landcare Inc*

Bill Muller had a dream. When he looked from his Bethungra house across the paddock to his main farm dam, it was typical of many farm dams. Surrounded by bare ground and suffering from erosion and water quality issues, it was devoid of any native wildlife. But in Bill's mind he had a vision of an oasis - a lush, healthy, biodiverse dam with thriving vegetation in and around it, fish and birds, and clean water.

Turning Bill's vision into a reality required an understanding of what to do and how to do it, as well as the resources to make it possible. Luckily, Murrumbidgee Landcare's Cross Property Planning (CPP) project was able to deliver all this and more.

The CPP project was established to address the issue of ongoing degradation of native vegetation in the central Murrumbidgee region. It aims to link and enhance the fragmented vegetation remnants in the landscape, and to help land managers balance production and biodiversity conservation on their farms. The project has received funding of almost \$1.6 million over six years, from the Australian Government's Biodiversity Fund, and the NSW Environmental Trust's Community Bush Regeneration program.

The structure of the project has been a key to its success - it does not look at individual properties in isolation, nor does it rely solely on giving out funding to land holders to undertake on-ground works. Instead, the approach has been to foster a "cross-property" approach. Land holders receive advice and support to develop work programs which complement and connect native vegetation (or proposed revegetation works) on neighbouring properties.

For Bill, this meant designing revegetation works around his property dam to connect with Grey Box Grassy Woodland remnants upstream. His plantings were also designed to link with larger remnant stands on the roadside and vegetated areas on the property of his neighbour, John, who is also involved in the CPP project.

Another major focus of the CPP project has been the educational and networking component, with regular workshops, field days and social events being held. These have helped local land holders to understand how natural resource management (NRM) can be successfully integrated with their agricultural enterprise. Not only can it benefit production, it can also create biodiverse habitat for native fauna (and the farmers themselves) to enjoy.

The CPP project has been able to successfully engage land holders, and spark a revival of interest in Landcare and NRM. Farmers are excited about their revegetation projects. They are sharing their stories with their neighbours, learning what others have done, and applying this knowledge to their own properties.

As Bill said, "This dam used to be the worst on my property; now I love it. It is wonderful to see the birdlife that is returning, knowing that the water is clean and healthy for my sheep, and the dam has even been stocked with Murray cod and golden perch. It's inspired me to look at other problem spots across my farm, and try to create little patches of vegetation. With any luck, these will help rebuild native habitat and link to other patches across the region".

Bill's new dream reflects perfectly the vision of the CPP project.





*Bill's dam in summer 2014, prior to any work. Remnant vegetation can be seen just beyond the dam*



*Bill Muller inspecting his dam in early 2016. The dam has been redesigned to incorporate an island in the centre and uneven edges with differing levels of vegetation*



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