



Farm Water Management Project summary report

September 2025

Water wisdom: The lessons and legacy of a two-year mission to strengthen drought preparedness

Introduction

The Farm Water Management Planning Project was a two-year initiative designed with a simple yet critical goal: to help farmers prepare for drought by developing and beginning to implement on-farm water management plans. These plans would allow farmers to assess their water needs for stock and domestic use, evaluate their storage and delivery capacity, and take steps to ensure that water is available in the right places at the right times.

This project was about empowering farmers across the Riverina, the Murray and Southeast NSW with the knowledge, tools and confidence to take practical steps that would minimise drought impacts on livestock, pastures, soils and natural assets. It was also about strengthening networks, building local expertise, and leaving a lasting legacy of resources and skills that would continue to benefit farming communities long after the project ended.

Over the course of two years, the project reached hundreds of farmers, landholders and technical experts. It exceeded many of its original targets for workshops, field days and demonstration sites, while also producing valuable tools and templates that are now freely available for future use.

Along the way, the project teams learned important lessons about delivery methods, communications, governance, behaviour change and the realities of working across a wide range of regions, agriculture enterprises and varying seasonal conditions.

This summary outlines the project's objectives, delivery and results, and then addresses key learnings gathered from two years of collaboration across regions, agriculture sectors and organisations.

By sharing these insights, future programs can build on the groundwork already laid and continue to strengthen drought preparedness among farmers within the region and beyond.

Part 1: Project Summary

Project Aim: Planning for productive water management in a drought-prone country

The Farm Water Management Planning Project aimed to help farmers proactively plan for any seasonal conditions they may encounter, from average seasons to times of drought, by developing a farm water management plan based on a thorough assessment of their farm. This well-prepared farm water management plan allowed farmers to:

- **Identify and quantify water needs** for stock and domestic purposes.
- **Assess current capacity** through dams, tanks, waterways, and other storage.
- **Plan and implement infrastructure improvements**, such as pipelines, troughs, or additional storage, to ensure adequate and accessible water across the property.

It supported farmers to shift away from guesswork, estimates based on historic understandings and vague assumptions, to understanding the real figures around their water requirements and their current storage.

By improving this understanding these farmers could improve their water security, and in turn maintain healthier livestock and pastures during drought, protect soil and natural assets, and recover more quickly once conditions improved. The benefits extended beyond individual farms, strengthening regional resilience and contributing to the long-term sustainability of Australia's agricultural sector.

Objectives

The project was guided by four core objectives:

1. **Increase awareness** among landholders of the importance of farm water planning for stock and domestic needs.
2. **Provide resources and support** to help farmers begin preparing a Farm Water Management Plan.
3. **Improve knowledge** of farm water budgeting, understanding both needs and available supply.
4. **Build regional capacity** by equipping partner organisation staff with the skills to support farmers during this two-year project and continue this work beyond the life of the project.

Project Delivery

The Farm Water Management Planning Project was funded through the Australian Government's **Future Drought Fund** and coordinated by the **Southern NSW Innovation Hub**. Delivery was managed by the **NSW Government** through the Murray Local Land Services and carried out by seven **Project Delivery Partners** across the Murray, Riverina and Southeast Local Land Services.

These delivery partners included: **Holbrook Landcare Network, Riverine Plains, Western Murray Land Improvement Group, Corowa District Landcare, West Hume Landcare and Rice Growers Association, along with Riverina Local Land Services and South East Local Land Services.**

The project was overseen by a steering committee with representatives from all involved organisations. On-the-ground delivery was handled by project officers and subject matter experts specialising in a range of issues including water management, soil management and livestock

nutrition, who facilitated workshops, field days, the establishment of demonstration sites, water testing and other activities, and provided technical guidance.

The delivery partners were critical to the project's reach and impact. They brought strong local networks, trusted relationships with farmers, and an understanding of regional priorities and challenges. This local knowledge allowed the project to adapt to the unique needs of different communities, while still maintaining a consistent set of tools and resources.

Participation and reach

Across the two years, the project's outcomes were significant:

- **Workshops:** 30 delivered (exceeding the target of 26)
- **Field Days:** 20 delivered (target 20)
- **Demonstration Sites:** 12 delivered (target 10)
- **Farmers developing water management plans:** 252 (slightly below the target of 270)
- **Cash contributions:** \$103,199 (target \$64,750)
- **In-kind non-cash contributions:** \$405,130 (target \$368,190)

In total, more than **500 farmers, landholders, and frontline industry staff** attended events, with a broader reach of over 650 people when project staff and presenters are included.

Feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive. Evaluation data showed:

- **100% of workshop participants** increased their knowledge of farm water management planning.
- **Average knowledge increase:** 24%
- **Average satisfaction rating:** 89%

Part 2: Key learnings

The following 12 insights capture the most important lessons learned during the project. These outline the issue, the insight gained and the implication for future work.

By capturing this information, others can learn from the enormous amount of work done so far, and the groundwork is set for more farmers in the future to use the program's tools and resources to continue to prepare for drought.

1. Looking beyond "Plan Completion" to measure project success

In the project's original design, one of the main performance indicators was the number of farmers who completed a formal Farm Water Management Plan. While this is a clear and measurable sign of success, it did not reflect the entire reach of the project and the positive impact of the work done by the project delivery partners.

For some farmers, the act of physically completing the plan was simply not a priority. Others began the process but paused due to competing priorities, seasonal pressures, or personal circumstances.

Importantly, there was also a group who did not finish the plan but had gained enough information from workshops, site visits, and discussions to make meaningful changes to their

farm water systems. In these cases, learning and implementation happened without the formal “completed plan” milestone being reached.

This showed that while “Plan Completion” was a valid key performance indicator, other useful indicators could include:

- **Workshop enrolments** – even if attendance didn’t follow, registration indicated interest and provided contact details for follow-up. Program delivery partners could then follow up with the person who enrolled to identify additional ways for them to engage with the project.
- **Website traffic and online downloads of resources** – a sign that farmers had engaged with the program’s tools on their own terms.

Lesson for future projects: Track multiple forms of engagement and impact. Success can be expressed in different ways depending on farmers’ preferences, needs and circumstances, acknowledging that knowledge uptake, mindset shifts, and small but meaningful actions can be just as important as the production of a formal plan.

2. Multiple project partners leads to improved peer-to-peer learning

The Farm Water Management Project was delivered by a collaborative partnership that included the Southern NSW Innovation Hub, NSW Local Land Services, and seven regional delivery partners.

The benefits of this partnership model were clear:

- Strong local networks and trust within farming communities
- An understanding of what would resonate with their particular audience
- The ability to tailor workshops and field days to local conditions.

It’s important to note that each delivery partner operated in a different agricultural context, with variations in enterprise types including livestock, cropping and mixed farming, along with differences in regional climates, farmer demographics and organisational capacity.

Coordinating such diversity required ongoing flexibility. Performance levels varied, influenced by staff turnover, competing workloads, differences in communication style, and budget constraints. Some partners were highly proactive and exceeded targets, while others required more direct support and prompting.

Understanding and adjusting to meet these needs was an important part of the success of this project.

And the benefits were undeniable. Each organisation brought valuable expertise, networks, resources and ways of operating that not only helped the farmers in the region but increased the skills and capacity of the delivery partners to deliver water management programs.

Lesson for future projects: While farmers will benefit through the information available, projects such as these are a great way to increase the capacity of regions to deliver extension projects effectively, long after the funding for the current project has ended.

“There is a lot of benefit in being involved in collaboration because it spreads the knowledge and also brings in other knowledge that interacts together. It gives a more holistic package.”

- Peter Smith Saphire Irrigation Consulting

“The benefits of this style of project is that we all get to learn from each other. We, as the Southern New South Wales Hub, are looking across a huge diversity of people, communities, landscapes and agricultural operations and each of the partners we work with are a different subset.”

- Angus Dunne, Southern SNW Innovation Drought Hub

“My experience has shown that being part of a large collaborative project has many benefits. You get to work with experts from a huge pool that you may not normally come into contact with. We also get to work with the project officers from across the entire region. We learn from each other, which is so important.”

- Kathie Le Busque, West Hume Landcare

3. Multiple layers of governance creates both opportunities and challenges

The involvement of multiple layers of governance has clear opportunities as mentioned above, but this also brings with it complexity.

Each governance level had its own timelines, approval processes, reporting requirements, and organisational priorities. In practice, the competing needs of different agencies could, at times, create tension between maintaining a consistent project approach and adapting to regional circumstances.

In most parts, these governance challenges were anticipated and addressed at the outset, with established mitigation strategies including:

- Clear delegation of decision-making authority for day-to-day delivery matters
- Pre-agreed thresholds for changes that require higher-level approvals
- Streamlined reporting and schedules to ensure clear transfer of information throughout the project levels to reach everyone involved.

Lesson for future projects: The more governance layers there are, the more intentional coordination is needed. Early agreement on processes and boundaries will help maintain efficiency and morale.

“Looking at the project from the outside, the governance of it could appear quite complex, but in reality, the way it worked across the whole region was really quite seamless.”

Kathie Le Busque, West Hume Landcare

4. Program preparation and upskilling takes time

The early stages of the project revealed the unavoidable reality that setting up a complex, multi-region program takes longer than expected. These initial activities included:

- Contract negotiation and confirmation
- Development of activity work plans
- Creation and testing of training materials
- Upskilling of delivery partner staff

- Promotion to target audiences.

These all took significant time and resources before delivery could gain any traction. This “slow start” compressed the delivery phase in what was already a tight two-year timeframe, placing pressure on partners to meet targets within a shorter operational window.

Lesson for future projects: The takeaway is that setup time should be explicitly factored into funding agreements. In a two-year program, dedicating the first six months to contracting and training leaves only 18 months for delivery. After busy peak seasons and holiday seasons are excluded from the calendar, the window for delivery becomes increasingly tight. A longer project term, or an initial planning phase funded separately, would ensure the delivery phase has the time it needs to achieve maximum impact.

5. Program delivery methods need to be tailored to individual groups

Early on, the project relied heavily on full-day workshops as the primary delivery method. While effective for some farmers, this format was impractical for others, especially those with long travel times, seasonal work pressures, or a preference for shorter, more focused learning.

Innovations such as the “Lunch Litre” online session, developed by Holbrook Landcare Network, provided an alternative, more flexible option. Other formats, including farm walk and talks, half-day field days, and evening meetings, attracted farmers who might otherwise have missed out.

Lesson for future projects: This flexibility significantly boosted attendance in certain regions. The lesson is that a variety of delivery methods, both online and in-person, increases reach and accommodates different learning preferences.

“(We know) we actually have to tweak our approach to work better with them. So, through partnership, we get to build off of each other. Through this project we saw examples where one partner might have developed a framework or a report or a way of engaging with people and then other people can trial that and test that out in their patch.”

- Angus Dunne, Southern SNW Innovation Drought Hub

6. Make it easy for farmers to attend and learn

One of the most effective strategies in the project was “stacking” FWMP content with other relevant topics at existing events. For example:

- Combining water planning discussions with cattle handling workshops
- Adding FWMP sessions to field days on stock management areas or erosion control
- Hosting double-field days with morning and afternoon themes, encouraging attendees to stay for both.

This not only increased numbers but also made water planning feel part of a bigger farm management toolkit. Farmers were more likely to stay engaged when FWMP information was presented alongside topics they had already prioritised.

Lesson for future projects: Future programs should actively seek co-delivery opportunities, both to share costs and to tap into existing farmer interest in complementary areas.

“I’ve improved my knowledge of stock water management, what’s important and the need to look at more efficient systems because of the great rate of evaporation that we have in this area, but

also like the importance of water quality and the effect on stock production. Better water quality leads to better production outcomes.”

- Janet Manzin, Rice Growers Association

7. Provide great resources

High-quality, tangible resources made a big difference to farmer engagement. In particular:

- **Well-designed workbooks** provided a clear, structured guide to creating a plan
- **Template and example plans** in print and digital PDF formats offered practical reference points
- **Aerial farm maps** were a particularly powerful addition, helping farmers see their water assets and gaps in a new way. These maps turned abstract concepts, like “reticulation efficiency”, into tangible discussions about tank locations, pipe runs, and flow rates.

Lesson for future projects: Invest in customised, user-friendly materials. Farmers are more likely to use resources that are visually clear and directly relevant to their property.

“It’s been great to have all the resources that have been available and to collaborate between the groups as to different ideas on how to deliver the project, and what we can do to encourage landholders to come along to the events that we’ve been holding.”

- Janet Manzin, Rice Growers Association

8. Clear and consistent communication is essential

The project’s communication approach for both internal and external communications evolved over time.

External communications: Early on, inconsistent messaging from different delivery partners would have hampered the development of the program’s identity, making it difficult to raise awareness across the region and gain any sense of authority or credibility among the target audiences. Once standardised key messages, branding, and promotional templates were introduced, awareness, engagement and enthusiasm among the delivery partners improved.

Internal communications: Communication between governance levels and delivery partners also improved as processes were refined. Regular updates, clear channels for questions, and faster decision-making helped keep everyone on track.

Lesson for future projects: Develop a communications strategy from the outset that addresses both external promotion and internal coordination. Consistency builds recognition and trust.

9. It’s all about changing behaviour - which is extremely hard to do

Behaviour change is the heart of drought preparedness work, and it’s one of the hardest outcomes to achieve. The project confirmed that two things are essential to support farmers to change their approach to water management:

1. **Motivation:** Farmers need compelling reasons to change. These include economic incentives, proof points from trusted sources, case studies showing benefits, peer-to-peer learning and word of mouth.

2. **Convenience:** Even motivated farmers will delay action if the process is too complex, time-consuming, or poorly timed for seasonal realities.

Barriers such as workload, volatile seasonal conditions, financial pressures and family commitments mean that adoption often happens in stages, not all at once.

Lesson for future projects: As is common with extension activities in the agriculture industry, projects need to plan for behaviour change over the long term. Use relatable examples, remove unnecessary barriers, and provide repeated opportunities for engagement.

“Seeing what our landholders have been able to do on-ground has been deeply rewarding for me personally being able to guide them through the process and at the end of the day see that they have made changes that mean that their water quality is going to be deeply enhanced.”

“They are going to be able to move the water around their farm in a way that makes more sense, it’s more efficient to them, their stock is going to have better quality water and they’re going to be much more efficient throughout that whole process.”

- Kathie Le Busque, West Hume Landcare

10. A good program will have a Strong finish

The final months of the project saw a surge in activity and participation, including:

- 20 workshops and 14 field days delivered
- 12 demonstration sites established, with additional enhancements to two more
- Over 400 attendees across events in the final period
- More than 100 one-on-one follow-up contacts.

This strong finish reflected both the determination of delivery partners to meet and exceed their targets, and the momentum built over two years.

Lesson for future projects: Allocate resources and planning for a concentrated final push. This enables organisers and participants to harness the momentum that inevitably comes with the end deadline and increases the project’s impact beyond the official funding period.

11. Leave a lasting legacy

Some of the most valuable outcomes of the project are those that remain after formal funding ended. For the Farm Water Management Planning project, these include:

- Demonstration sites for ongoing learning
- Centralised online access to workbooks, templates, calculators and contacts
- Skilled delivery partner staff ready to continue supporting farmers
- Strengthened local networks for sharing information and experience.

This legacy effect is one of the most valuable outcomes, as it allows benefits to continue with and even possibly without ongoing funding. Ensuring materials are centralised and accessible means new farmers can benefit long after the project’s formal close.

Lesson for future projects: Think beyond the funding period. Ensure tools, resources, and skills are preserved and accessible for future use.

“It’s really important to understand that this project is a step in the direction. This project is not about achieving everything all at once. It’s about bringing people together and building capacity in the industry and the regions because water and agriculture is not going anywhere. We’re going to need to keep developing these people and working on how we use water and agriculture.”

- Angus Dunne, Southern SNW Innovation Drought Hub

“I would absolutely recommend for other Landcare groups or producer groups to be involved in this program. One of the legacies of this program is that myself and the other project officers that have been involved have increased our capacity to support our land holders through the farm water management process.

“Being part of that has meant that our skills have increased, but also our confidence in advising our landholders on how to go about this process themselves.”

- Kathie Le Busque, West Hume Landcare

12. Play the long game

Water management improvements, like many on-farm changes, can take years to fully adopt. Some farmers need to see multiple seasons before committing. Others will take years to slowly implement the change required. In other cases, adoption may take a generational handover of the farm to come to fruition.

Future programs should recognise that:

- **Follow-up support** is ideal for sustained momentum. Check-ins 12–24 months later can re-energise farmers and track adoption
- **Resources must remain available** so farmers can revisit them when circumstances change
- **Policy and funding cycles** should align with the long-term nature of farm adaptation.

The project laid a strong foundation, but the real drought preparedness will be built in the seasons and years to come.

Lesson for future projects: Drought preparedness is a journey, not a one-off activity. Programs should plan for follow-up support and resource availability over many years.

Conclusion

The Farm Water Management Planning Project demonstrated that with the right tools, support, and networks, farmers can take meaningful steps to prepare for drought. It also showed that building capacity, both among farmers and among those who support them, creates benefits that extend beyond the life of a single program.

While the project met or exceeded most of its targets, its greatest achievement may be the legacy it leaves: skilled local officers, trusted delivery networks, practical tools, and stronger farmer awareness of the importance of water security. The key learnings provide a roadmap for future initiatives, ensuring that the investment made in this project continues to yield returns in drought preparedness and business sustainability for farmers across Australia, for years to come.

