



# Irrigation skills initiative

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## IN A NUTSHELL

► A partnership has been formed between the irrigation associations and the Australian government to develop a national certification and training framework and an information network for the irrigation industry

***All irrigators understand the value of water and the importance of its careful use in terms of farm profitability and the sustainability of farms and the wider environment. The adoption of new irrigation techniques and technologies is testament to this fact – be they simple landforming operations or sophisticated computerised irrigation using soil moisture sensors.***

Increasing competition for water for environmental, recreational and urban use is putting irrigators under pressure to 'justify' their right to access water resources for productive use. If irrigators are to continue to have access to water, they need to be proactive in demonstrating to the wider (predominantly urban) community, that they are responsible and nationally important users of this precious resource. One way of doing this may be to provide 'proof' of expertise, knowledge and good practice. Qualifications and certification can provide this proof, especially if they are linked to best on-farm practice for production and the environment.

## Recognising knowledge and skills

The federal government has funded a new project in support of the development of a voluntary framework for recognition of irrigation knowledge and skills for three sectors of the irrigation industry:

- irrigators throughout Australia growing a range of commodities
- service providers such as irrigation designers, installers equipment retailers, agronomists and others
- staff of irrigation water supply organisations

A partnership between the Irrigation Association of Australia (IAA), the Australian National Committee on Irrigation and Drainage (ANCID) and the Australian government will concurrently develop a national irrigation industry certification and training framework, as well as an irrigation industry information network.

There is still a lot of water reform to come so this project provides a three-year opportunity for individuals, groups or even whole industries to get ahead of the irrigation game. While there has been an increase in the amount of training in irrigation offered around Australia in the past few years, it

often has limitations. These limitations include offering "one-size-fits-all" courses, lack of on-farm practice, lack of fit with any recognised framework and little reference to the environmental implications of irrigation.

Riverina irrigators have done more training than most, with training offered by the irrigation companies through Land and Water Management Plans and NSW Department of Primary Industries through WaterWise on the Farm. These training courses were linked to incentive programs which increased the numbers of farmers who participated. Still, many farmers in Australia prefer to learn their irrigation skills by combinations of trial and error, advice from family and neighbours, or information supplied by professional advisers. This is particularly the case for irrigators who farm outside the irrigation supply areas.

## New approach for irrigation training

The skills initiative will differ from previous training programs in the following ways:

**NRM focus** – the aim of the project is to improve water use efficiency for improved management of natural resources, looking beyond system efficiency or crop water efficiency to the place of the irrigation activity in the whole farm and catchment context.

**National approach** – this is a national project that will be delivered locally and regionally.

**Flexible delivery** – the project is based on a nationally recognised skills framework for agricultural, horticulture, irrigation and rural water supply. The framework can accommodate any commodity or irrigation system type. The project will recognise all activities that help to develop skills in irrigation practice and will be able to identify where each activity fits within the national frameworks.

**Holistic** – the project is aimed at three groups within the irrigation sector mentioned previously, under the assumption that by improving skills and standards in all three groups there will be far better chance of NRM improvements.

The initiative will be conducted in two parts. The first is to work with the three different sectors to encourage the development and uptake of improved skills in irrigation practice. The project recognises the existing effort being put




into irrigation skills development and will only seek to add value to these programs or to work on filling skills gaps. While it is not necessary for individuals to gain a qualification in irrigation, it is highly likely that those who participate will gain a qualification as a result of their efforts.

The second part of the initiative is to establish a nationally recognised certification program that covers each of the three sectors. The term certification is used to denote a common recognition of skills acquisition, experience and continuing professional development. For example, certification for an irrigator or farm manager might look like the following:

#### **Certified Irrigation Manager**

- = documented irrigation experience and knowledge
- + irrigation qualification or equivalent
- + regular skills and knowledge updates

The IAA's skills initiative will be managed by Alison Carmichael. Alison has worked in irrigation education and training since 1996 and in the past has been closely involved in the IAA's training activities as a consultant through her company Naturally Resourceful Pty Ltd. For the next three years she will be responsible for implementing this project for the IAA. 

#### **Further information**

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