



Environmental Champions - getting started is easy!

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IN A NUTSHELL

- ▶ The Environmental Champions Program streamlines the compliance to best practices and regulatory requirements for rice-based farming systems, while at the same time recognising environmental stewardship of the region's irrigators
- ▶ The program comprises of five levels that small groups work through at their own pace, according to a program that best suits the group's needs and preferences
- ▶ The implementation and management of the chemical storage sheds demonstrate the benefits of the program, by providing a means to comply with regulations, as well as improve management and agronomic efficiencies on farm

Recognising irrigators for their environmental stewardship, and streamlining the demands of regional environment programs and best management practice requirements of relevant government agencies and irrigation bodies, are the aims of the Environmental Champions Program.

The program is a voluntary improvement program designed for farmers by farmers, and it is an initiative of the Australian rice industry. David and Sally Marsden, of Warrenden, Finley have participated in the program and describe it as a practical, credible, environmental management system.

"The program has been developed by rice growers with input from many groups that have a good knowledge of the environment. The program is practical and more importantly, credible, and is an environmental management system that the whole industry can adopt and benefit from."

The program

The Environmental Champions Program has five levels that provide growers with achievable targets for change. Each of the levels support farmers and improve their knowledge in management in a step-wise manner.

Level 1 – Basic industry standards

Level 1 covers compliance with certain targets and most farmers will find they are already undertaking some of the actions. Activities include chemical training and storage, irrigation education, meeting SunRice quality assurance standards, meeting irrigation licence requirements and base vegetation/habitat assessment.

Level 2 – Planning for beyond industry standards

This level focuses on planning to go beyond basic industry

standards. Key components involve developing strategies and action plans that will enable environment and productivity improvement. Training will ensure farmers have the skills to look critically at their farm systems and prioritise their actions.

Level 3 – Putting plans into action and enhancing biodiversity on farm

This level is designed for implementation of action plans developed in level 2. The level also encompasses the flexible, practical options identified in the Biodiversity Strategy and Plan and Greenhouse Strategy for the rice growing region.

Level 4 – Trade, innovation and eco-efficiencies

Level 4 is designed to look for opportunities that will provide an economic return for their previous planning and implementation. Such opportunities include carbon, biodiversity and salinity credits and turning waste into dollar returns.

Level 5 – Regional efforts towards catchment sustainability

In the highest level the farmers reach beyond the farm to consider working in partnerships to address regional and catchment outcomes. Such concepts include possible changes in land use and engaging in green trade-offs within or beyond the region.

Self-directed group work

The Environmental Champions Program is delivered through a cluster group network – each group consisting of 5–10 farmers who work together through the program, providing support to each other. The response to this approach has



been fantastic, driven by the fact that the groups are selected and led by the participants themselves.

Each group is managed according to how the group wishes to work through the program. There are three regional coordinators available to provide training, support and assistance to groups and individuals as required. The regional coordinators, although part of the Ricegrowers' Association team, are based with each of the three irrigation companies – Murray, Coleambally and Murrumbidgee – in the rice growing regions.

After three years since the program's launch, there are now 194 farming businesses involved, working in 25 groups. All participants say that working in a group has been a great way to learn, share ideas and create solutions to problems; and it has also been a good opportunity for a social gathering.

Simple and beneficial

The Environmental Champions Program is easy to join and no prior knowledge is required. It just takes one proactive farmer in an area to make a few phone calls and encourage neighbours and friends to come to an introductory meeting to find out what it is all about. Many of the participants have been surprised at how simple the program is, taking up little time and money, while still providing them with benefits.

Most farmers in the program feel they are staying a step ahead of the legislative bodies, and would prefer to be undertaking the legislative requirements in a voluntary, streamlined process, designed by farmers, as the program offers, rather than doing it by force, as many believe will become inevitable.

A great benefit of the program so far is that participating farmers now have an organised chemical shed that is compliant with Australian Standards (Figure 1). A centralised storage point and the associated record keeping system

means that the farmer knows exactly what type and how much chemical they have on farm and where to find it. Farmers have also found that keeping records of pesticide use made it easier to keep track of usage, assisting with better chemical rotation programs to avoid or minimise the build-up of pesticide resistant weeds and insects. The wide range of benefits offered by the implementation and operation of the chemical storage sheds is a good demonstration of how the Environmental Champions Program can help farmers save time and money, leading to efficiencies that improve the bottom line.

One of the main drivers for the development of the ECP was the farmers' desire to leave a healthy legacy for future generations. The biodiversity component of the ECP aims to do just that by encouraging growers to be more aware of the biodiversity on their farm and to enhance these areas where possible. Enhancing biodiversity on farm will improve the overall health of the property including the soil, plant and animal life, in turn improving production. One of the cluster groups has joined together to work on a project that will join the native vegetation on all of their properties (Figure 2). This is designed to create a large wildlife corridor as well as providing production and aesthetic benefits to the farmers and their families.

Relevant to the whole farm

The Environmental Champions Program is flexible enough to accommodate the whole rice-based farming system, ie other summer and winter crops, dryland farming and livestock operations, as well as rice production.

The basis of the program is for growers to look at their farm and farming business as an individual property and as part of the catchment. This concept is applicable to all farming enterprises showing that the program can easily be modified to suit the business and location of anyone who is interested in joining. Warren and Allison Lang of Finley reinforce this point.




Figure 1 A chemical storage shed that meets Australian Standards, and provides farmers with one centralised, organised and simple management system for pesticides used on farm



Figure 2 The Gogeldrie cluster group planning for a biodiversity project that will link the native vegetation on all of their properties



"The positive outcomes achieved through being involved in the Environmental Champions Program are not restricted to the rice enterprise. They will improve our farming operations as a whole." 

Further information

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Become a champion

To find out more about the Environmental Champions Program or how to start a group call the RGA office or a regional coordinator:

- Ricegrowers' Association – 02 6953 0433
- Peter Evans – Regional Coordinator Murrumbidgee – 0439 484 553
- Sandy Hopkins – Regional Coordinator Murray – 0429 120 679
- Sally Barter – Regional Coordinator Coleambally – 0429 663 507



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