

History of Lockyer Water Users Forum (LWUF)

Overview of the Lockyer Region

The Lockyer region encompasses some of the richest farming land in Australia supporting one of Queensland's most important centres of agriculture.

The region has the largest value of vegetable production in Queensland. The gross value of horticulture in the Lockyer Valley is \$120 million per year. The region is often referred to as Brisbane's Salad Bowl or Australia's winter Salad Bowl and includes the townships of Gatton, Laidley, Esk and Forest Hill.

Although the Lockyer Valley has the largest value of production for agricultural regions in Queensland its future is clouded by the uncertainty over water.

Water availability is critical and many growers have been operating on reduced plantings because of the lack of water.

A long term solution must be found quickly to deliver water security to the Lockyer Valley.

Conflicting water issues facing the Lockyer

The Lockyer Valley has a history of competition between farmers due to the nature of the Horticultural business whereby your neighbour could be your biggest competitor for a market.

The history of irrigation development within the Lockyer area has occurred under the banner of numerous ad hoc approaches towards management both from the end-users point of view and from government.

Such issues range from the varying degrees of on-farm efficiency and use of water to a wide variety of regulatory processes throughout the area. These include having some parts fully licensed and metered to other areas operating within a completely unregulated system.

Currently there are 15 identified geographic areas within the Lockyer and two special interest groups. The latter are focused on bringing in new sources of water for irrigation in the Lockyer.

With this as a backdrop to an impending water resource planning process, there rose a need to bring competing interests together to form a basis for moving forward. Essentially the irrigators wish to take control of their own destiny.

As well as this it became obvious that to ensure irrigators had input on the future management and direction of water policy in the Lockyer particularly in relation to the pending South East Queensland Recycled Water Project, there needed to be roundtable discussions.

With the many groups involved there were stark variations in opinion towards the future management of Lockyer water resources.

Linton Brimblecombe as Chair of the Lockyer Catchment Association was approached by City to Soil to look at how things could move forward.

A facilitated meeting was called and as a result of this meeting the irrigators voted to proceed with the process and invited Linton to Chair the newly formed group known as the Lockyer Water Users Forum (LWUF) in December 2001.

In June 2002 the LWUF became an incorporated association involving representatives from the 17 member groups.

Irrigators have gone from a point of heated discussion to a point of acceptance of differing points of view and seeing the need to accept others points of view and to seek to understand where others are coming from.

A challenge of this process has been to encourage irrigators to look beyond their own back paddock and to explore the effects of the individuals' actions upon others.

This has been done by a process of monthly meetings, that has sought to include a wide range of other stakeholders to give support and direction to the decision making process.

Some of the actions have included developing a relationship with the Department of Natural Resources and Mines (DNR&M), strong involvement with local governments including Laidley, Gatton, Esk and Ipswich, and the regional natural resources body known as the South East Queensland Western Catchments Group. Relations were also developed with industry associations including Queensland Farmers Federation, Queensland Irrigators Council, Growcom, Agforce, and Queensland Dairy Organisation.

The Forum has also developed effective working relationships with the Minister of Natural Resources and Mines, Federal Member for Blair Cameron Thompson, and the State Member for Lockyer Ian Rickuss.

Achievements to date

The Lockyer Water Users Forum has become the peak irrigation body in the Lockyer Region. The Forum has identified and has kept its focus on three main areas of activity.

1) Membership

to be a truly representative body of a sector there has to be broad support for the process. As a significant part of this activity The Forum believes strongly in being inclusive to all sectors and individuals through good representation of the member representatives. This activity has proved to be a major challenge due to the lack of resourcing, and most activities being done a voluntary basis. The success or failure of local groups often comes down to the keenness of the leadership within that group. This issue has been given new impetus with the appointment of a membership Sub Committee.

2) Self-management

the concept of self-management of the water resources of the Lockyer came about in response to the impending water resource plan and a concern amongst member groups that there was a need to take the management of the existing water resource into our own hands. After consultation with other industry bodies, including the Queensland Irrigators Council an

approach was made to the DNR&M to gauge acceptance of such a concept. After workshopping and discussing the issue thoroughly the department agreed to develop this process further in conjunction with the LWUF.

In 2002 through the LWUF, the Forum negotiated with the Premier of Queensland a twelve month moratorium on the allocation of water in the Central Lockyer. This moratorium is still in place due to the self management model that is being developed.

This project is still progressing, with the support of the SEQ Western Catchments group a project officer is now to come on board. A significant amount of effort is going into this process and the Forum has invited the School of Natural Resource Sciences, Queensland University of Technology (QUT) to come on board to provide scientific expertise.

3) Extra water

irrigators have been searching for new sources of water for the region including Wivenhoe Dam and recycled water from urban areas. The LWUF is currently taking a lead role in the recycled water process, seeking to work with other interested parties including, Ipswich City, Brisbane City Council and state and federal governments.

This process is currently gaining momentum with new projects being scoped and funding options being explored. The LWUF has been successful in applying for Federal Government funding for further enhancing its work on this project.

As part of this work the LWUF has also been successful in negotiating with the Department of State Development on a current study on the irrigator's ability to pay for the water.

The work of the LWUF is continuing and gaining momentum as the past three years work start to show results that will have significant, long lasting and well planned outcomes for the future of the Lockyer Valley's Agricultural Sector.