



North-West farmer, Darryl Lohrey, and national landcare facilitator, Coral Love.

# Landcare: more than planting trees

By DON DEFENDERFER\*

**A** THREE-YEAR National Landcare Program (NLP) project funded for more than \$600,000 in the Cradle Coast and northern regions of Tasmania is encouraging primary producers to think about landcare's direction.

Grower discussion groups have been exploring answers and implementing solutions to their most pressing questions regarding the productivity of their farming practices.

Through Serve-Ag, the project is working with six grower groups (three in the Northern Midlands and three in the North-West) to focus on assessing and monitoring soil and surface water conditions on their farms.

The objective is to increase productivity and reduce degradation by promoting best practices in land management and encouraging the adoption of integrated property management planning methods.

The farmer-driven project is entitled, *What are we going to do about it?*

Each region has a project officer who facilitates the groups and their activities including working with field officers, agronomists, consultants and other experts.

The farmers in each discussion group determine the focus of their groups, so the project is tailored to the diversity of farming activities, on-ground issues and differing priorities in each region.

What I like about this project is the focus on farmers through the discussion groups.

Working with groups of farmers and focusing on the productivity issues important to them creates great synergies within the groups and new ideas are developed by the sharing of issues and really probing the essence of some of the more tricky questions.

This is the core of what landcare is all about – assisting farmers to be more productive and sustainable at the same time.

Good landcare is something that adds to the profit margins of growers rather than being seen as an added expense.

This project is digging deep into

what we mean by landcare and sustainable agriculture these days. I think it has the potential to be a national model for how groups of farmers can approach complex productivity issues and implement sustainable practices.

These discussion groups are not just talk-fests, they are serious meetings, bringing together the best information and people available from a range of disciplines.

North-West area potato farmer Darryl Lohrey likes participating in this NLP project.

"It is where landcare should be focused, it is not just about planting trees," Lohrey says.

"These groups are doing it (applying and developing new ideas and practices) rather than simply reading about it.

"Processing companies like McCain's also like working with our discussion group. They appreciate the ability of the groups to be able to test and adopt new technologies very quickly."

The project's aim is to enable growers to make decisions based on monitoring results from trials, crops



and off-farm sampling – for example, streams – and to then be able to demonstrate changes in sustainability and productivity issues on their farms.

Key issues being focused on include soil health, water quality, salinity, pesticide use and change management (changing to more sustainable farming practices by increasing the knowledge and capacity of farmers to react to sustainability issues).

Expected outcomes of the project include:

- Landholders are able to maintain or improve soil condition by managing soil structure, maintaining soil organic matter levels, retaining nutrients and preventing erosion and waterlogging.
- Landholders understand how to improve water quality in local waterways through reducing the peak concentrations and total load of nutrients in local waterways, as determined by results from key stream monitoring sites.
- Management guidelines available for salt-affected land in catchments covered by the project's monitoring network.
- Provision of nutrient budgeting tools to improve the efficiency of fertiliser use on farms and thus minimising off-site losses of nutrients.
- Promotion of crop management



An onion field near Tasmania's Table Cape.

practices that result in minimising the risk of agricultural chemicals reaching waterways.

Some of the outputs for the first 12 months of the project include:

- monthly farmer group meetings;
- sampling transects established on 48 farms;
- 12 GIS-GPS maps completed and geo-referenced;
- soil nutrient analyses on 48 farms at 10-paddocks-a-farm completed;
- 14 pesticide analyses undertaken at six-samples-a-group;
- water analyses completed on 48 farms at two-samples-a-farm; and
- newsletters and information displays developed.

ServeAg's project manager, Doris Blaesing, says grower discussion groups in the different regions are focusing on different aspects of sustainability issues that are most relevant to them.

"We have learned that the 'one-size-fits-all' approach to implementing sustainable agriculture principles might not be the most effective method," Blaesing says.

"Growers each run a unique business and have varying communication and learning needs.

"The three grower groups in the Cradle Coast region are focusing on better understanding the effect of farming inputs and soil management on soils and crop outcomes.

"Major tools used are input –



Lohrey shows off some of his spuds.

water, fertiliser and so on – and crop monitoring along with farm mapping.

"Combined with hands-on soil capability assessments – structure and microbiology – grower trials and nutrient budgeting, the information gained and discussed in groups will allow grower to evaluate their whole farm management practices.

"The three grower groups in the NRM North region mainly focus on monitoring of outputs – for example, nutrients, and pesticides – but are also evaluating soil structure, stubble management, soil management and salinity risks.

"Nutrient budgeting and soil moisture monitoring is part of the output management approach.

"Monitoring of water bodies has created a catchment perspective – that is, how upstream activities may affect downstream users – including the environment."

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