

Newsletter

Issue #1

October 2018



SUSTAINABLE
FARMS

Introducing our first newsletter

Welcome to the first newsletter for Sustainable Farms, a new project initiated by Professor David Lindenmayer's research team at the Fenner School of Environment and Society, The Australian National University. The newsletter will keep farmers who have been part of the long-term monitoring up to date with our work and flag.

Our previous newsletter 'Welcome to the Wildside' has been retired, but many of its features, such as staff profiles and findings from the field surveys, will live on in this Sustainable Farms newsletter. We also have a website, Facebook and Twitter, where you can find a suite of information and details of events, and you can contact us by phone or email (see back page for details).

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- Mental Health research
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What is *Sustainable Farms*?

Sustainable Farms is an inspiring new initiative to support sustainable agriculture, co-funded by The Australian National University and private donors. Sustainable Farms has been created to accelerate on-ground change in practices that will directly benefit biodiversity conservation, improve farm profitability, and assist in improving farmers' mental health and wellbeing.

We know that science-based information is critical for farmers to sustain food production, maintain healthy landscapes and keep rural communities that rely on agriculture strong. Sustainable Farms is founded on 20 years of long term ecological work, undertaken by David Lindenmayer's research group at The Australian National University. This research has been dedicated to understanding how to restore and manage temperate native woodland vegetation in Australia's eastern wheat sheep belt.

We have ANU staff working in the field with our established farmer network to deliver an innovative and influential farms-based outreach and extension program. Our partners in Landcare and Local Land Services helped to get the project established and we will continue to work closely with them.

Sustainable Farms is also breaking new ground by bringing together a multidisciplinary research team to work on a series of research projects that will examine the links between biodiversity on farms, farm profitability and farmer mental health and well-being.

Ultimately, Sustainable Farms aspires to lead a program of research and extension activities to support management of and investment in natural assets on farms. To this end, we will also work with farmers to influence programs and policies of government bodies and industry groups.



Meet the Sustainable Farms Director and field team

Our field staff all have a background in environmental research, live in regional towns and work in agricultural landscapes. They liaise with farmers to collect data, run field days, and discuss concerns and potential solutions. In the next newsletter we will introduce the ANU research team and their work.



Michelle Young

Director, Sustainable Farms

Michelle leads the delivery of the project and works with researchers to develop relationships with policy makers and industry groups. M: 0437 256 513



Mason Crane

Senior Research & Extension Officer

Mason maintains the project's network of demonstration farms and assists farmers and groups to achieve sustainable agriculture. M: 0427 770 594



David Smith

Biodiversity Officer

Dave conducts long-term monitoring surveys for the farm research and assists with science communication. M: 0428 094 316



Bindi Vanzella

Media and Event Coordinator

Bindi coordinates project communications to farmers and manages field days and other events. M: 0427 008 976



Daniel Florance

Research & Extension Officer

Dan manages some of the long-term monitoring farm research assisting this project and manages data collation. M: 0400 682 789



Clare Crane

Biodiversity Officer

Clare conducts long-term monitoring surveys for the farm research and provides technical support to other research projects. M: 0417 451 834

Sustainable Farms mental health research

Earlier this year you may have received a Land Managers Survey which asked about your farming business, your finances (including taxation records), and your willingness to participate in mental health research. Only a few people returned that survey to us, and we received feedback from people that they were not interested in providing the finance data requested, so they didn't reply.

We greatly appreciate all the feedback we received. On the basis of this information we are sending out a separate invitation to all landholders in the long term ecological monitoring studies to invite you to participate in the Sustainable Farms mental health research. The feedback we received from people earlier in the year is also helping us to improve our finance research, and we will update you about this work in 2019 when we have finalised our approach.

Our mental health project is called the **FarmWell Longitudinal Study**. In the coming week we will invite you to provide some information about your health and wellbeing in a secure online survey. We will use this information to see whether there are links between farm ecology, mental health, and

farm profitability. This project is led by Bregje (Bree) van Spijker and Phil Batterham, who are part of the Sustainable Farms team, based at the Centre for Mental Health Research at The Australian National University. **We would greatly appreciate your participation in the survey, as it will provide a world-first opportunity to link the data collected on the ecology of your farm to health and wellbeing outcomes.**

If you have previously indicated that you are not interested in participating in our mental health research (either through the Land Managers Survey or through our field staff), we will not contact you further about this project. If you are not interested in participating in this study, please get in touch with the team and we won't contact you further about this study. Not participating in this mental health research will not affect your relationship with Sustainable Farms in any way.

For questions or more information, please contact Bree, Alyssa and Phil on 1800 854 080, or at sustainablefarms@anu.edu.au. Information will also be available on the Sustainable Farms website.

Demonstration Farms and Field Days

We recognise that farmers need to hear from other farmers. The Field Days we run give farmers a chance to learn from each other and also hear from ANU ecologists, agronomists, microbiologists, soil scientists and others. Sustainable Farms works with landholders who have examples of well managed natural assets. Their farms demonstrate to other farmers what can be achieved from investing in projects like farm dam enhancements, native shelterbelts, and riparian restoration.

This October, Sustainable Farms will run a number of 'Breakfast with the Birds' events to share what farms can do to conserve woodland birds (see the back page for event details). In 2019 we will run summer and winter field day series across the project area. Details will be available by December on the website.



Sustainable Farms footprint showing the location of our current demonstration farms



Generous gift to Sustainable Farms

Kent Keith recently made a generous gift his Ballanda Park property near Boorowa in NSW to support Sustainable Farms at ANU. The gift was facilitated by the George Alexander Foundation, which has accepted the land donation and taken the responsibility to sell it under terms that will preserve Kent's conservation goals for the property. Proceeds of the sale will go to the ANU.

"I am proud to support the establishment of Sustainable Farms," Kent says. "I believe passionately in the value of wildlife ecologists working with graziers like myself, and the benefits their knowledge brings to regional communities."

Kent Keith has already devoted much of his career and retirement to similar endeavours. He and his first wife, Noel, purchased land near Hall in the 1960s and acquired the Ballanda Park sheep property in the early 1980s, and managed it in such a way that native plants and animals returned.

A few years after Noel passed away, Kent met Marion, and the couple moved to Ballanda Park. They have a deep connection to the land they settled on. "Ever since I've had the place, 30-odd years, it was a bit of untouched country," Kent says. "Some had been cleared, but nothing for the past 35 years. What had been a hill of shrubs is now a hill of forest. I've always loved the flora and fauna. We just loved it out there. The wallabies would jump in the fish pond to swim."



Marion and Kent Keith; Ballanda Park (above)

Findings in the field during the winter and spring ecology surveys

The field ecology team has completed our survey work for 2018 and commenced the spring monitoring season. Our winter bird surveys produced a number of interesting findings. Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters and White-fronted Honeyeaters, bird species that usually occupy arid and semi-arid areas, were found to have moved east into the woodlands to escape the dry conditions. We also had the first sighting of the Southern Bell Frog in our Greater Murray monitoring program, which has been running for over a decade. One woodland species that appeared in good numbers this year was the Crested Shrike-tit, a charismatic species that likes to tear bark from trees using its strong bill and eat the insects living under there.



Crested Shrike-tit, Peron's Tree Frogs, Stone Gecko

Our spring monitoring is focused on reptiles. We have put out railway sleepers, roof tiles and sheets of tin, at all our sites. These 'artificial substrates' provide great refuge for reptiles and are easy for us to search, as we can simply lift them and check underneath for critters. At one site near Gundagai, we found 26 young Peron's Tree Frogs huddling together under artificial substrates beside a dam within a planting. We have also encountered many Stone Geckos this season. These are common in the woodlands and we find them mostly at sites with plenty of rocks and fallen timber. Stone Geckos are small geckos that sometimes assume a 'threat posture' when disturbed (see photo).

We are still out and about working on spring surveys, so stay tuned for more updates from the field.



Gang-gang Cockatoo

Upcoming events

17 October 2018: Sustainable Farms Parliamentary Launch
Parliament House, Canberra, with the Minister for Agriculture
the Hon. David Littleproud, MP

Celebrate National Bird Week with 'Breakfast with the Birds'
early morning bird walks

To celebrate our official launch and National Bird Week (beginning 22nd October), Sustainable Farms is hosting seven free breakfast events.

Join one of our ecologists as they guide you for an early morning bird walk to look for birds, listen for different calls and identify them, and then enjoy a barbeque breakfast for everyone who attends.

See our website for details of upcoming events.



Contact us

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Field days and media: 0427 008 976

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