



Photograph by Huon Stephens



Clipped pyrenese.

Making conservation pay

By HUON STEPHENS

IS IT important to conserve our environment while maintaining the level of agricultural productivity for which we are renowned? If so, who is going to pay to ensure that our plants, animals and unique landscape remain intact while we continue to produce the quality of food that the world demands?

'Making Conservation Pay' is the theme of a program being undertaken in North West Victoria by an alliance comprising the Birchip Cropping Group (BCG), the North Central and Mallee Catchment Management Authorities and the CSIRO. The BCG is an independent, farmer driven, not for profit, research and extension organisation. BCG engages experts to provide high quality information directly to farmers at field and expo days or through their member network. The organisation is large enough to attract reputable scientists but still small enough to maintain a close connection with local farmer groups.

The Making Conservation Pay program seeks to help farmers main-

tain and increase productivity while demonstrating conservation practices. The program was launched at Melbourne's Federation Square in November 2004.

BCG chairman Ian McClelland believes that, while all farmers want to leave their farm in a better way than they found it, in Australia we are expected to produce clean and green food, while maintaining clean water and a healthy environment – but who should pay for these services?

"Most farmers are good conservationists. A message to the urban community is that we should accept the good things we do and recognise those that we'd like to change – these are the challenges for the future," Mr McClelland said.

Making Conservation Pay aims to demonstrate how farmers can maintain or increase production while also ensuring conservation values are incorporated into their business.

But how does this balance remain economically viable?

By encouraging farmers to identify areas on their property that are not suitable for production (i.e. do

not return a reliable profit) and to use those areas for conservation. These areas can provide habitat for native animals and occasional shelter for livestock.

The initiative also aims to give land managers tools for assessing ecosystem function. This will help determine where conservation efforts should be placed to maximise conservation and production gains. Initially, basic geographical information system (GIS) vegetation data and aerial photography will be used. Hopefully this will lead to the inclusion of productivity mapping.

These ideas have been raised before. What makes this program different is the driver – the farmer. BCG is an independent farmer organisation promoting a sustainable triple bottom line for producers. It is the motivation of being environmentally friendly that has motivated BCG and the farmers that it represents to carry this program to realisation.

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