widcorp
water in drylands
collaborative research program

Project Summary

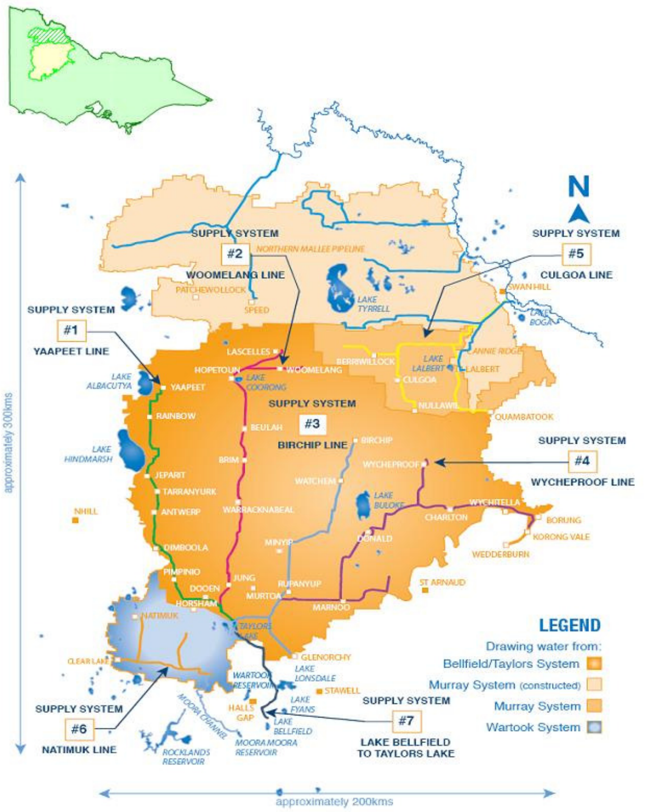
Farmer behaviour and enterprise change as a result of the Wimmera Mallee (WM) Pipeline – One year on

Project Overview: ***The project aim was to investigate changes in farmers' attitudes and aspirations towards the WMP and the perspectives of farmers towards opportunities that may emerge from the rollout of the WMP. This multimode survey (online and telephone) has been conducted one year on from the initial baseline study in 2007, and forms part of a longitudinal study to track these changes over time. The survey conducted in September and October 2008 involved 249 farmer respondents within the Wimmera Mallee Pipeline (WMP) Supply System 1 to 5. A representative sample was achieved across the study area, with at least 20% from each of Supply Systems 1, 2, 3 and 4 and 6% from SS 5.***

Results

Data analysis included monitoring changes over the last 12 months. As outlined below, there was minimal changes in land ownership, farm equity and income, and long-term farm plans. There was also little change in the areas of farm activity, water use, attitude, concerns and opportunities explored. However some changes were noted with respect to off-farm income, perceived benefits of the pipeline, and on-farm water sources. This follow-up survey also collected new information about pipeline connection status, water trading and pipeline infrastructure expenditure as reported below.

- Over the past 12 months, nearly one fifth (19%) of respondents have changed the amount of land they owned, leased or share farmed. Of those who have changed, the most common response was to increase their farm size. Most farm respondents (89%) stated their long-term plans for their farm had not changed from the initial survey.
- Those who lease land felt more secure about continuing their lease when connected to the pipeline, than in the 2007 survey. Of those who lease land (26%), nearly all (94%) of the 2008 respondents stated it was likely to very likely they would continue to lease in comparison to 68% in 2007.
- Similar levels of on-farm income and farm equity were noted, with two-thirds (62%) earning less than $100,000 from the farm in 2006/07; and two-thirds (61%) having more than 75% farm equity. However, off-farm income is considerably higher than 2007 baseline data with the average percentage income being 50% in 2006/07 compared to 33% in 2005/06.
- Over two-thirds of respondents have made no changes to farming activities. Those who have, selected cereal grain production (86%), followed by sheep for meat (56%), pulse production (51%) and sheep for wool (48%).



Source: GWMWater 2007

Above: The survey included farmer respondents from Supply Systems 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5 of the WM Pipeline.

- Very few respondents stated water use has changed on their farm (11%). There was no change in the ranking of main water uses with livestock (85%) ranked first, followed by domestic use (67%); and crop-spraying (62%).
- Nearly half (46%) of the respondents stated their main water sources have changed over the past year, with the channel system and the pipeline being the most significant source of water to meet on-farm demands. Rainwater appears to be a common supplementary water supply.
- At the time of the survey, one third of respondents (33%) had connected to the WM Pipeline, and one quarter of all respondents stated that the pipeline was a main source of water for their farm. On average, the pipeline accounts for 71% of total water used on their farms.
- The overall attitude toward the WM pipeline remained positive with 84% indicating their attitude was positive to very positive.
- Farmer's knowledge on two aspects of the pipeline had increased with respect to knowing when and how much water they would get from the pipeline. As would be expected, those connected to the pipeline appear to have a greater knowledge about the pipeline.
- The three top perceived benefits for farmers connecting to the pipeline related to accessing a flexible water supply, improving the application of farm chemicals, and improving livestock condition and stocking rates. Most benefits were rated lower than in 2007.
- There was no notable difference in the proportion of respondents who have explored future opportunities in relation to the pipeline. In total, 80% had not explored new opportunities such as intensive livestock enterprises or diversification, in comparison to 76% in 2007.
- Like the baseline results, the most concerning aspect of the pipeline for three quarters of respondents is the cost of piped water.
- The majority of the respondents either did not want to engage in, or were unsure about their participation in a possible future water trading scheme. This question was not included in the 2007 survey, so no comparisons can be made.
- Respondents were asked about investment in on-farm pipeline infrastructure, which was a new question in this follow-up survey. Over three quarters (77%) had invested in on-farm pipeline infrastructure, and with the majority of those investing in water tanks (98%) and pipes/laying of pipe (76%). The median expenditure on tanks was $10,000, and pipes/laying of pipes, $3,000. One quarter (28%) of farmers have budgeted for on-farm pipeline expenses over the next 12 months, again with water tanks, and pipes/pumping, being the most popular items to invest in, with a medain budget of $5,000 and $4,000 respectively for these items.

The results of the survey suggest the rollout of the pipeline to date has had limited influence on development of new farm activities, however it has made improvements to current farm practices and attitudes remain positive. The most significant benefits of the pipeline still relate to current farm practicalities of water accessibilty, quality water for spraying, and water for stock rather than for new development opportunities and new livestock operations. Overall, the interest in benefits of the pipeline generally decreased, and these benefits may not be seen as high in the current farming context when other factors such as drought conditions continue.

As part of this longitudinal study, the next round of the survey will occur in July-Aug 2009.

WIDCORP and DPI would like to sincerely thank the Wimmera Mallee farmers for their participation in this research. Your contribution is important to improve the capacity of DPI to assist the farming community to adapt to a piped system and provide relevant on-farm information.

More background information and detailed findings are available in the full report, out soon on the WIDCORP website at www.widcorp.com OR contact widcorp@ballarat.edu.au, ph 03 53622681, or write to: WIDCORP, PO Box 300, University of Ballarat, HORSHAM, VIC 3402