

New reports analyse impacts of plantation industry on rural communities in Western Australia

Two new reports released today by the Cooperative Research Centre for Forestry provide the Western Australian community with a better understanding of how the expansion of the plantation industry in recent years has changed rural communities.

The reports, *Community attitudes to plantations: survey of the views of residents of south-west Western Australia* by Dr Kathryn Williams of the University of Melbourne, and *Socioeconomic impacts of the plantation industry on rural communities in Western Australia* by Dr Jacki Schirmer of the Australian National University, provide a detailed understanding of how people living in rural communities view the rapid expansion of plantations, and of the socioeconomic changes that have accompanied this plantation expansion in recent years.

Dr Williams and Dr Schirmer will present their findings at public seminars in Albany (Monday 22nd June, 5.30pm), Bunbury (Tuesday 23rd June, 5.30pm) and Esperance (Thursday 25th June, 5.30pm).

Dr Kathryn Williams says that understanding community views on plantations can inform land use policy and communication: ‘Our research makes it clear that, for many residents, plantations are not “just another crop”. Understanding how different people view plantations can help improve communication among plantation companies, government and residents.’

Key findings of her survey of residents’ views on plantations include that:

- Plantations were often viewed less positively than traditional rural land uses such as cropping and grazing, and new ‘green’ land uses such as wind farms and revegetation.
- Most participants considered plantations acceptable at some level, with around 20% finding plantations very acceptable. At the same time, around 12% of participants considered eucalypt plantations grown for paper and pulp to very unacceptable.
- Some plantations are considered more acceptable than others, for example when grown for timber rather than pulp and paper, when grown on poorer or saline soils or when grown on land previously used for plantations rather than on agricultural land.
- Beliefs about the benefits of plantations for rural communities and the environment are strikingly diverse, and appear to strongly influence respondents’ level of support for plantations.

Dr Jacki Schirmer, meanwhile, has been analysing the social and economic changes that accompany plantation expansion: ‘We’re finding that the changes that result from plantation expansion are positive for some people and negative for others – the impacts depend on a range of factors’. Key findings of her work include that:

- Hardwood plantations currently generate 0.45 jobs per 100 hectares, and softwood plantations 1.44 jobs per 100 hectares.
- While plantations generate fewer jobs before the ‘farm gate’ than most traditional agriculture, they generate more jobs than grazing and cropping once downstream processing is included in the analysis.

- A shift in land use from traditional agriculture to plantations is accompanied by a shift in employment opportunities, with most jobs in the plantation sector based in large towns.
- The expansion of plantations has led to high turnover in rural population in some areas, but has resulted in only a small net loss of rural population.

Recent changes to the plantation industry will be discussed in forthcoming seminars, with this recent research informing the discussion.

Public seminars 22nd to 25th June

Dr Williams and Dr Schirmer will present their findings in:

- **Albany** on Monday 22nd June 2009, 5.30-7.30pm at the Dept of Agriculture and Food, Conference Room A&B, 444 Albany Hwy
- **Bunbury** on Tuesday 23rd June 2009, 5.30-7.30pm at the Dept of Agriculture and Food, Verschuer Place
- **Esperance** on Thursday 25th June 2009, 5.30-7.30pm at St Johns' Ambulance Centre, Windich Street.

All members of the public are invited. Dr Williams and Dr Schirmer will be available to speak with the media following the seminars.

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