

## Where to from Here? A Reflection on the Land Services Program

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### Introduction

The western region is the largest Local Land Services (LLS) region in NSW. It covers 40 percent of the state and is greater than Victoria and Tasmania combined. This diverse, semi-arid rangeland supports a range of communities with grazing, dryland and irrigated agriculture, mining and tourism the main land uses. Rainfall is low and highly variable – summer dominant in the north and winter dominant in the south.

The Land Services Program (LSP) is a two year program specifically designed for land managers in the Western Local Land Services (WLLS) region who are striving to implement change and increase profitability in their farm business. Since its inception in 2018, the LSP has assisted 25 pastoral businesses across the region. The program incorporates one year of group sessions focused on managing the human, financial and natural resource components of a farm business. These sessions are delivered by both contractors and LLS staff. The second year allows land managers access to financial support for continued training of their own choosing as prioritised by their action plan. Participation in the program allows participants access to a training budget of up to \$10,000, available on a cost share basis.

This is complemented by one-on-one support and guidance from WLLS staff, continuing the strong customer relationships built through on-going work across the region. Mentors are available for participants to use during the program. Mentors are influential land managers located within the region and are selected due to being recognised as leaders in primary production or landscape management.

An independent review of the LSP was undertaken to ensure the program was delivering maximum benefit to land managers and operating effectively for stakeholders and the delivery team. The results of this evaluation demonstrated the high value of the program to participants; where all concluded with an increased confidence in undertaking further investment in on-ground practice change for their business. Key areas for improvement of the program were also identified through this process.

The preceding 12 months have provided the opportunity for reflection and new perspectives in relation to delivery of the LSP and incorporation of the evaluation recommendations. In addition, this succession of program staff has allowed for valuable reflection on what is required to build a successful career in the rangelands.

This paper summarises the key findings of this program, including the strengths and outcomes, challenges faced in the delivery and proposed changes for the future delivery of the LSP in western NSW.

### *Strengths and Outcomes of the Land Services Program*

The LSP provides a holistic approach to farm business planning, allowing multiple topics for property planning to be covered through regionally relevant workshops and training. Flexibility has been built into the program, allowing for delivery to be tailored for each intake. The LSP also allows land managers to create their own goals and identify training to build those skills. The cost-share training budget arrangement creates participant buy-in, motivating goal-orientated decisions. Moreover, graduate participants have continued their education as a group in other LLS and external programs. Finally, staff are able to learn and network with land managers and external consultants, building relationships with participants through the case officer approach.

### *Challenges Faced in 2022/23 Delivery*

The primary challenge was the program's deferral due to the departure of key members of the WLLS agriculture team in late 2022 who were previously responsible for the delivery of the LSP. This led to a five month delay in program delivery while staff recruitment and onboarding took place. This resulted in incoming staff navigating new roles whilst learning and delivering program content. A former staff member was contracted for support during this transition, to ensure the integrity of delivery was upheld. After the period of mentoring, incoming staff were able to deliver independently.

Land manager commitment, motivation and engagement were also a substantial challenge. Land managers were enthusiastic to sign up, however, prioritisation of the program alongside managing their businesses was extremely difficult. Three land managers ultimately exited the program after the first workshop due to commitment issues. This was influenced by the large distance between the program participants, some of the land managers were hesitant to 'share' meeting locations to make travel equal among the group. Receiving timely communication from land managers about their availability and date suitability was also challenging. Land manager engagement with the mentors and the training budget was underutilised. Challenging seasonal conditions, such as flooding and severe storm systems also affected land managers ability to leave their properties and staff ability to travel to venues. Scheduling with external consultants was also an obstacle at times.

Looking at how this will affect the next intake, as well as changes to make moving forward, the first two challenges; the deferral of the program and staff handover, can be disregarded. These were situational, and it has been determined that this will not be an issue moving forward.

Inclement weather and scheduling will always be a challenge for delivery and there is no silver bullet solution. Ultimately, these challenges have been considered when building flexibility into the program, however there was a noticeable compounding effect resulting from the extremes experienced in the 2022/23 delivery. Moreover, receiving timely communication from the group

about dates for workshops or RSVPs was difficult with significant follow up required. This was addressed with the intake at the time, who were happy with the current mode of communication and did not want to make changes. Setting out clearer guidelines and modifying the commitment statement signed by participants at the induction of the program will conceivably improve this.

Revisiting the independent review that was conducted in 2021 and reflecting on the challenges experienced in the 2022/23 program, there were some conclusions to be made. Land manager commitment and motivation has previously been identified as a limitation to delivery. The program is designed for land managers to identify key areas of their farm business that need improving and supply them with tools and assistance to seek out opportunities to undertake these enhancements. Where commitment, motivation and engagement are lacking, knowledge uptake is reduced and opportunities to fully utilise the program decline significantly.

Mentors were also identified as being an underutilised component of the program. In the last two intakes, there were no participants who engaged the services of the mentors available to them. Underutilisation of the training budget was recognised as a limitation, and this linked directly to the land managers' ability to identify key areas of improvement and their level of motivation and commitment throughout the program. Participants demonstrating low motivation and commitment failed to prioritise the time to seek out opportunities to use their training budget, resulting in a rush to secure services prior to the program deadline.

### *So, where to from here with the Land Services Program?*

The objective is to increase the robustness of the program to evolve as needed for both participants and delivery staff. The following changes are recommended:

1. Currently, expressions of interest for the LSP are not increasing with the program's reputation and the targeted audience is the same each year. A program re-brand, including a re-naming, could assist in capturing land manager's attention for recruitment. An evaluation of the promotional methods, complimenting the re-brand, has the potential to reach a wider audience.
2. The LSP is focused on rangeland grazing. However, interest has been expressed from dryland croppers and smaller lifestyle blocks. To expand the audience, the design of an alternative program stream or intake could make the LSP accessible and valuable to these land managers.
3. Currently the final year one workshop is aimed at consolidating the previous workshops and for participants to set their goals. This workshop is very content heavy, covering a range of topics as well as asking participants to think about their long-term goals. Creating another workshop to cover the production systems content would allow the action plan to be a separate workshop and participants can focus on their goal setting and utilisation of their training budget.

### *Changes for 2023/24 Delivery*

Changes that will be implemented into the 2023/24 delivery of the program include:

An initial online webinar to introduce the successful applicants to the program and clearly communicate commitment expectations before the first workshop. This would allow an outline of the travel involved with the spread of participants and the importance of continual commitment and engagement to get the best value from the program.

Slight delivery modifications to workshops will be employed to better explain the program and understand land manager commitments throughout the year. The delivery of the workshop content and production of resources for workshops will be reviewed. This will include modifications of the final workshop to reduce the high content load and focus on building the participants' action plans.

Improvement of mentor utilisation by re-engaging the program's current mentors and signing up new mentors from graduated land managers is planned. Previous participants would be an asset for current intakes to utilise. An increase in the engagement through the creation of mentor video profiles, rather than written profiles, for a more personalised introduction is predicted. The objective is to make mentors more approachable and allow participants to gain a feel for the person behind the profile.

### *Passing the Baton to the Next Generation*

Professional succession is a considerable issue in agricultural extension, particularly in the rangelands. Connection and knowledge sharing with industry professionals will guarantee the delivery of quality advice and services to land managers within the region. There is substantial rangeland research and extension programs that have been undertaken over many decades and it is imperative to recognise the learnings from this work and acknowledge its place in current programs.

Early career professionals in the rangelands face a significant learning journey, often with very little exposure to appropriate mentors or senior staff. Despite the challenges faced by up-and-coming rangelands professionals, there are significant development opportunities on offer and the diverse experience and enthusiasm new staff bring to these roles should not be overlooked. With appropriate support, programs such as the Land Services Program can benefit from new staff being involved, providing objective views on project management and delivery.

### **Conclusion**

The LSP is a customised initiative for land managers in the western region of NSW. The flexible delivery of the program allows land managers to set goals and undertake training to reach their aims using a training budget. Although challenges were faced in the 2022/23 delivery, improvements have been identified. These modifications are intended to increase the robustness of the program to evolve for delivery staff and future participants.