Perceptions of trees on farms

Lifting farm gate profit through high value agroforestry

Results from 26 interviews with farmers and farm advisors in Victoria, predominantly Gippsland.

Introduction

Trees integrated into agricultural systems benefit many other parts of farming enterprises such as crop and pasture production, soil structure and health, nutrient cycling and biodiversity, but these components are rarely directly accounted for in financial measures. To explore why farmers choose to plant trees, this fact sheet reports on farmer motivations for, and barriers against, increasing the establishment of trees on farms.

Farmer perceptions

To understand farmer perceptions to trees on farms, and particularly the benefits and barriers to planting trees, interviews were conducted in Victoria with 22 farmers and 4 farm advisors in 2018. These interviews focused on dairy and were concentrated in the Gippsland region, but included some other industry perspectives and regions. The results were broadly consistent across the different industries and regions and with the results from interviews in 2017 in Tasmania with 44 farmers and farm advisors.

Farmers value trees

Amenity and shelter from hot days and wind were nominated as the highest benefit of trees on farms for farmers in Victoria. Trees for shelter were noted by many farmers, although sheds and irrigation were also identified as methods to address the issue. Farmers also perceived other benefits of trees including the increase in property value through aesthetic improvements, as well as benefits from excluding stock in areas such as steep gullies or creeks and rivers. Reducing erosion and nutrient run off were also highly rated benefits of trees. It was noted that dairy enterprises, in particular, received a much greater, more certain and more frequent return on investment than timber could, particularly in Gippsland. Nevertheless, there was strong support for agroforestry as an Australian industry.

Trees slip down the to-do list

The main barriers to planting trees included the potential loss of high value productive land and the time and effort involved in planting as well as the number of other jobs continually pushing trees down the priority list. Many of the Victorian participants planted trees as part of their normal practice, especially in gullies, or along rivers, or to manage nutrient run off.

Funding support is highly valued

There was generally good awareness of potential funding options to support tree planting, especially when combined with a landscape or biodiversity function, for example through Landcare or Melbourne Water, however many were happy to fund tree planting themselves, in order to have full flexibility to plant how and where they wanted. Most saw the benefit of
financial incentives as being very important to motivate tree planting, even if they didn’t choose to access funding themselves.

**Agroforestry not recognised as including trees that stay on farms**

Perceptions of agroforestry were generally that it was about trees for harvest, rather than trees staying on farms, and most farmers felt that they never wanted to harvest their trees because their function on the farm (shelter, amenity or stock exclusion) was too important. However some farmers were interested in the potential of high value trees that could be grown over longer periods and selectively harvested when the market was prepared to pay a good price and many farmers saw the demand for a high quality Australian timber industry growing into the future (both locally and internationally) and would consider it more if the returns improved.

**Local, personal information still the best**

Sources of information were preferred to be local and verbal, with preferences for information about species and tree planting configurations. Field days and fact sheets were seen to be useful by some but others preferred more of a focus on supporting peer to peer learning through mentoring schemes and farmer groups, and through broader industry and policy levers, such as government funded schemes to underwrite prices for timber to remove market uncertainty. Online information and industry information was accessed by most, including social media to a lesser degree, but all interviewees noted the importance of following up with a one on one chat.

“There’s certainly a lot of research around benefits to livestock and having shade on really hot days, we’re fairly well aware of those, but if there are other benefits to the land, then that would encourage us.”

(Interviewee)

More details are available at [www.pft.tas.gov.au](http://www.pft.tas.gov.au) or by contacting us:

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