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RURAL DISPLAY UNITS

INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS
FOR INFORMATION
DISSEMINATION

A report for the Joint Venture
Agroforestry Program, Greening
Australia, and Land & Water Australia

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Foreword

There are an increasing number of publications produced through national, state and regional government agencies, science institutions and community organisations, which are aimed at rural communities. Historically most of the funding for these publications has been directed to production and publication expenses, with little emphasis on distribution. This can result in limited information transfer. The need to improve methods for channelling information to rural communities has long been recognised.

The Rural Display Units (RDU) project utilised existing Greening Australia networks in south-east NSW to engage rural suppliers to host display stands or RDUs containing environmental publications, and to monitor the interest in the publications displayed. Eight RDUs were established and managed in major rural townships and each contained 16 relevant environmental publications selected for each local region. RDUs were located in the following rural supply outlets: Boorowa Pastoral Supplies, Crookwell JD Hardware and rural supplies, Goulburn Produce and Rural Supplies, Gunning Rural Supplies, Hall –Landmark, Murrumbateman –Landmark, Queanbeyan –Landmark, Yass –Landmark.

More than 2200 copies of publications were distributed over the 6 month trial period. The shop owners felt that the displays were beneficial and relatively popular among customers. The trial indicated that rural display units are a useful way to disseminate research information to an audience not necessarily reached by current extension networks. Future use of rural displays is recommended, but requires attention to the service time (staff resources) required to survey and restock displays on a regular basis, and the need for suitable technical information targeted to local conditions produced by research and development organisations.

This project was funded by Greening Australia (through the Exchange project), Land & Water Australia, and the Joint Venture Agroforestry Program (JVAP). JVAP is supported by three R&D Corporations — Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC), Land & Water Australia (L&WA), and Forest and Wood Products Research and Development Corporation (FWPRDC). The R&D Corporations are funded principally by the Australian Government.

This report is an addition to RIRDC's diverse range of over 1500 research publications. It forms part of our Agroforestry and Farm Forestry R&D program, which aims to integrate sustainable and productive agroforestry within Australian farming systems. The JVAP, under this program, is managed by RIRDC.

Most of our publications are available for viewing, downloading or purchasing online through our website:

- downloads at www.rirc.gov.au/fullreports/index.html
- purchases at www.rirc.gov.au/eshop

Peter O'Brien

Managing Director

Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation

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Executive Summary

What the project is about

The Rural Display Units (RDU) project utilised existing Greening Australia networks in south-east NSW to engage rural suppliers to host display stands or RDUs containing environmental publications, and to monitor interest in the publications displayed between April to September 2005.

Who is the report targeted at?

This report summarises the results of the pilot trial, and is useful to agencies considering alternative ways to disseminate publications to rural audiences who are not being reached by existing extension.

Background

Historically most funding for communication of research has been directed to production and publication expenses, with little emphasis on distribution. This can result in limited uptake. There is a need to improve methods for channelling information to rural communities.

Aims /Objectives

The proposed outcomes of the project were:

- Customers of between 6-10 rural suppliers/centre have access to up-to-date relevant information distributed in a coordinated fashion
- Rural suppliers have access to display area and an opportunity for community service
- Greening Australia and source providers are kept up to date on relevancy of research publications and their popularity
- Information providers are given regular feedback on publication distributions

Methods

Eight RDUs were established and managed in major rural townships within 2 hours drive of Canberra. Each display contained 16 relevant environmental publications selected for each local region. The publications were selected to have some relevance to the southeast NSW agricultural region, and were chosen from pre-existing brochure-sized publications available from RIRDC, Land & Water Australia, and Greening Australia.

Results/key findings

More than 2200 copies of publications were distributed through the RDUs. The most popular included technical and localised publications relating to birds, paddock trees, weeds and general farm management. The publications taken in largest numbers (in order) were:

- Bringing Birds Back – Glovebox guide
- Paddock Trees – Brochure
- Lyndfield Park – Booklet
- Look after your natural assets- Booklet
- African Lovegrass fact sheet

The project highlighted the time, travel and resources required to distribute publications to the rural sector, particularly those outside Landcare and environmental networks which are regularly exposed to NRM information. It is a reminder that we need to resource information dissemination as an equal part of the PRODUCTION – PUBLICATION – DISSEMINATION product cycle. The project also highlighted the need for short publications which present R&D in a locally relevant way. Given ongoing resources, there is potential for proactive hosts of rural supply outlets to play a greater role in directing people to information and possibly setting up and managing RDUs independently.

As a result of this project, Greening Australia has partnered with the Upper Murrumbidgee Catchment Coordinating Committee (UMCCC) which is made up of local Landcare, environmental and government groups, in an 'Adopt a Display' program. Community groups and nominated individuals have been encouraged to adopt a local RDU and continue to organise for publications to be displayed.

RDU's will continue to play an ongoing role in disseminating environmental information to the community.

Longer term displays, using publication material specifically produced and targeted to the local region are recommended for trial in other regions, with ongoing resources to replace publication stocks and monitor usage of the material.

Introduction

There are an increasing number of publications produced through national, state and regional government agencies, science institutions and community organisations, which are aimed at rural communities. Historically most of the funding for these publications has been directed to production and publication expenses, with little emphasis on distribution, resulting in limited information transfer.

The need to improve methods for channelling information to rural communities has long been recognised.



Project Objectives

The Rural Display Units (RDU) project utilised existing Greening Australia networks in south-east NSW to engage rural suppliers to host display stands or RDUs containing environmental publications. Eight RDUs were established and managed in major rural townships and each contained 16 relevant environmental publications selected for each local region. RDUs were located in the following rural supply outlets:

- Boorowa Pastoral Supplies
- Crookwell JD Hardware and rural supplies
- Goulburn Produce and Rural Supplies
- Gunning Rural Supplies
- Hall -Landmark
- Murrumbateman -Landmark
- Queanbeyan -Landmark
- Yass -Landmark

The proposed NRM outcomes from the project were:

- The presence of RDUs gives the customers of 8 rural suppliers/centre access to up-to-date relevant information distributed in a coordinated fashion
- Rural suppliers have access to display area and an opportunity for community service
- GA and source providers are kept up to date on relevancy of research publications and their popularity
- Information providers are given regular feedback on publication distributions

The Project

Eight Rural Display Units (RDU)'s were established in host organisations throughout the regions and publication removal and feedback was monitored over a 6 month period.

The project involved the following activities:

- Staff allocated to secure and service sites, data collection, interpretation and reporting
- More than 40 publications were provided and 22 secured for displays
- A broad range of practical publications were selected providing both general and specific information tailored to each region (eg. Different weed species are relevant only to selected regions)
- 14 core publications (general) and 8 backups (specific) for rotation selected
- Database established and data recorded
- Appropriate display units identified, purchased and supplied
- Host rural supply outlets identified for RDUs
- RDUs established at host sites
- Monitoring undertaken every 2 months in June, August and October
- RDU refilled and managed for 6 months

A full list of publications and their performance is displayed in **Table 1**. These publications represent multiple formats, looks and styles however are similar in dealing with more local and practical issues.

Display set up and management included 5 visits to each of the 8 displays:

- Visit 1: Feb/March 2005 – Initial site visit and discussion with hosts
- Visit 2: April 2005 – RDU set up with selected publications
- Visit 3: June 2005 – Initial counting, refilling & replacing publications
- Visit 4: August 2005 – Second counting, refilling & replacing publications
- Visit 5: November 2005 – Final Counting, refilling & surveying hosts

The three periods outlined in the results below relate to the time between visits 3, 4 and 5.



Results

Publication Types

More than 2200 copies of publications were distributed through the RDUs. The most popular include technical and localised publications relating to birds, paddock trees, weeds and general farm management. The top 5 publications (in order) were:

- Bringing Birds Back – Glovebox guide
- Paddock Trees – Brochure
- Lyndfield Park – Booklet
- Look after your natural assets- Booklet
- African Lovegrass fact sheet

A graph showing the distribution of publications (greater than 200 copies) is presented in **Figure 1**. The lowest removal numbers were for publications such as catalogues and advertising material.

Table 1: Publications distributed through Rural Display

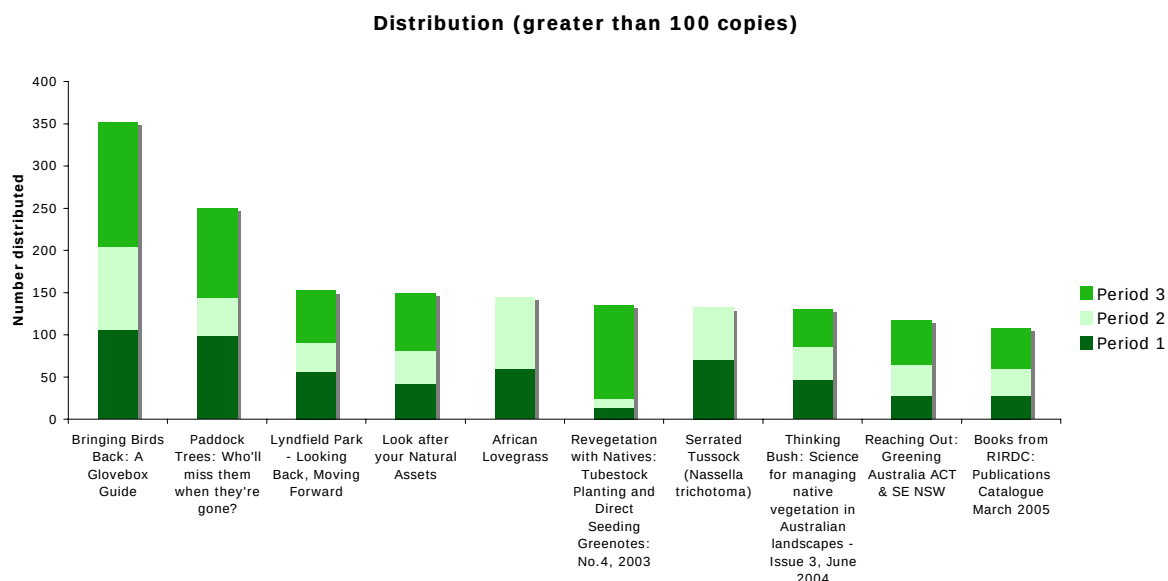
Units

		Stores								
Publication Titles	Organisation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Total
Look after your Natural Assets	UMCCC	0	7	23	13	20	30	40	16	149
Lyndfield Park - Looking Back, Moving Forward	LWA/GA	1	6	25	19	20	17	50	14	152
Bringing Birds Back: A Glovebox Guide	GA	12	16	120	16	53	43	59	33	352
Reaching Out: Greening Australia ACT & SE NSW	GA	20	3	7	3	15	15	29	25	117
Rivers - Preventing erosion to maximise wool production	LWA	25	5	6	0	5	2	17	0	60
Thinking Bush: Science for managing native vegetation in Australian landscapes - Issue 3, June 2004	LWA	2	6	30	7	18	22	35	10	130
RIP RAP -Connecting Communities	LWA	1	1	13	1	6	5	17	3	47
Salt Magazine: Issue No. 11 March 2004	CRC PBMDS MLA	4	2	11	4	19	17	24	2	83
Saltland Pastures in Australia: A Practical Guide	LWA	0	1	0	2	1	0	3	1	8
Books from RIRDC: Publications Catalogue March 2005	RIRDC	1	16	15	5	21	17	25	8	108
New Publications from the Joint Venture Agroforestry Program	JVAP	0	1	6	0	13	8	18	0	46
Useful databases and websites on agroforestry and farm forestry	JVAP	1	4	16	3	17	16	28	13	98
Paddock Trees: Who'll miss them when they're gone?	NPWS	4	17	40	9	51	60	45	24	250
Serrated Tussock (<i>Nassella trichotoma</i>)	CRC Weed Management	3	7	13	6	29	14	50	10	132
Chilean Needle Grass (<i>Nassella neesiana</i>)	CRC Weed Management	0	3	14	3	20	6	38	7	91
African Lovegrass	Cooma Monaro SC	1	0	14	3	17	16	37	56	144
Flora Search: Transforming Australian Landscapes	JVAP	0	0	0	0	0	0	12	0	12
Blackberry (<i>Rubus fruticosus</i> aggregate)	CRC Weed Management	0	7	9	3	12	9	19	4	63
Gorse (<i>Ulex europaeus</i>)	CRC Weed Management	2	2	8	3	5	0	19	3	42
St Johns Wort	Cooma Monaro	8	3	8	2	10	5	22	3	61
Revegetation with Natives: Tubestock Planting and Direct Seeding Greenotes: No.4, 2003	GA	15	4	12	3	22	50	23	6	135
Mistletoe - Friend or Foe? Greenotes: No 18, 1995	GA	0	4	0	5	0	0	0	0	9
Total:		100	115	390	110	374	352	610	238	2289

Key: 1. Boorowa; 2 Crookwell; 3 Goulburn; 4 Gunning; 5 Hall; 6 Murrumbateman; 7 Queanbeyan; 8 Yass.

CRC – Cooperative Research Centre
 CRC PBMDS – CRC for Plant-based Management of Dryland Salinity
 GA – Greening Australia ACT & SE NSW
 JVAP – Joint Venture Agroforestry Program
 LWA- Land & Water Australia
 NPWS – National Parks & Wildlife Service
 RIRDC- Rural Industries Research Development Corporation
 SC – Shire Council
 UMCCC- Upper Murrumbidgee Catchment Coordinating Committee

Figure 1:



General discussion and informal surveys of hosts during site visits revealed that most believed that the displays were beneficial and relatively popular among customers. The level of enthusiasm and proactive involvement of hosts toward RDUs was naturally diverse due to personalities, shop size and ownership. It was generally found that the hosts of smaller owner operated outlets were more positive and proactive.

The best performing outlets were those in higher population areas close to Canberra and Goulburn including Queanbeyan (610), Goulburn (390), Hall (374), Murrumbateman (352). **Figure 2** shows the performance of each of the 8 rural supply outlets.

Figure 2:

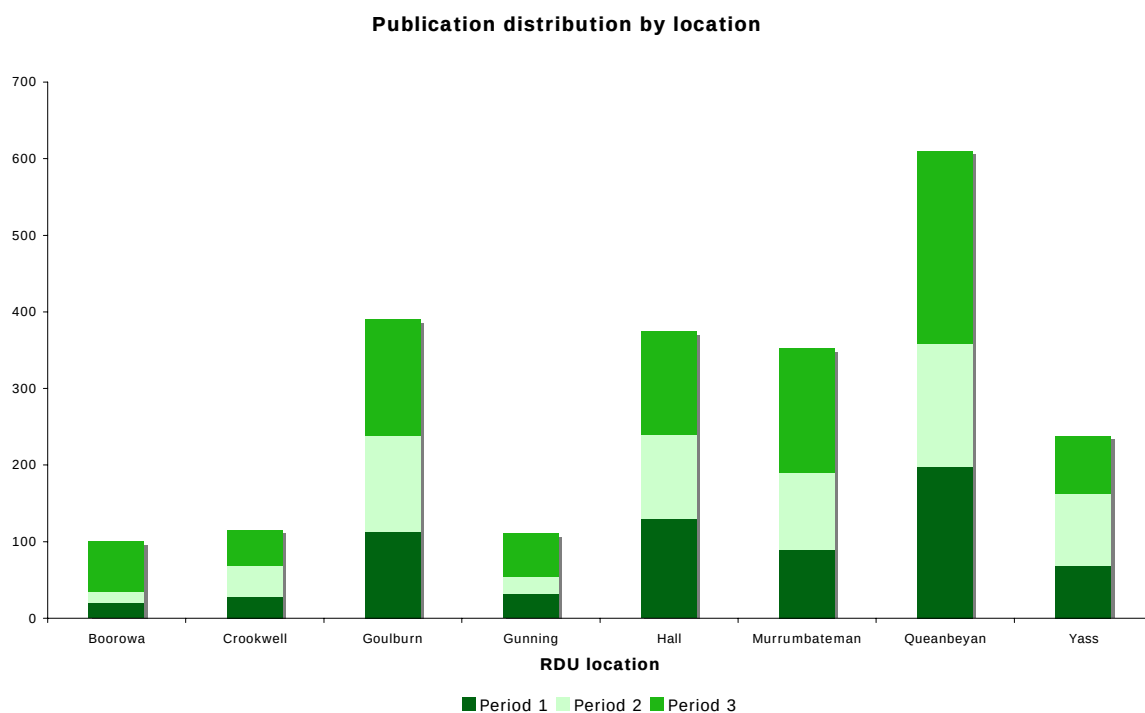
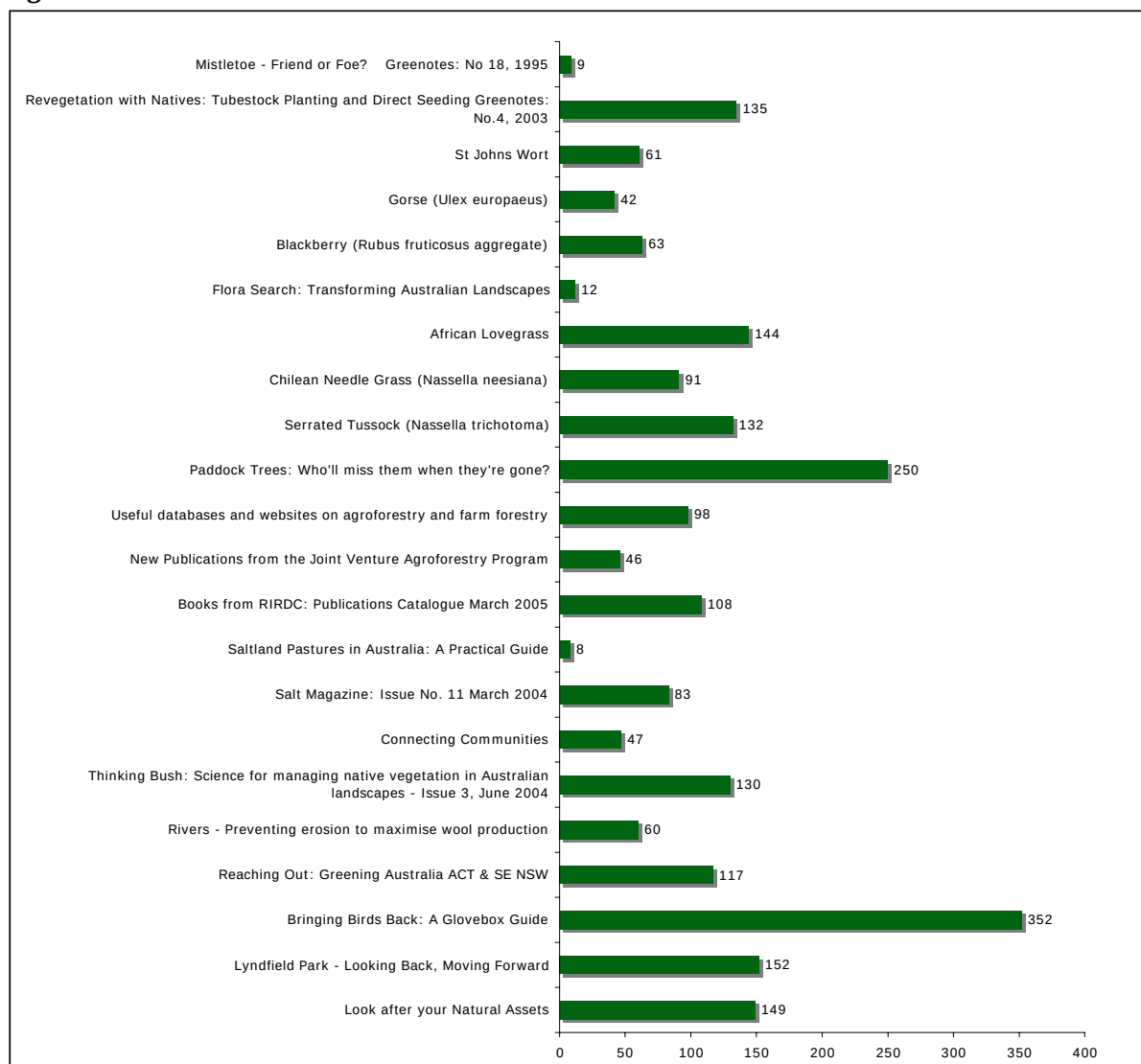


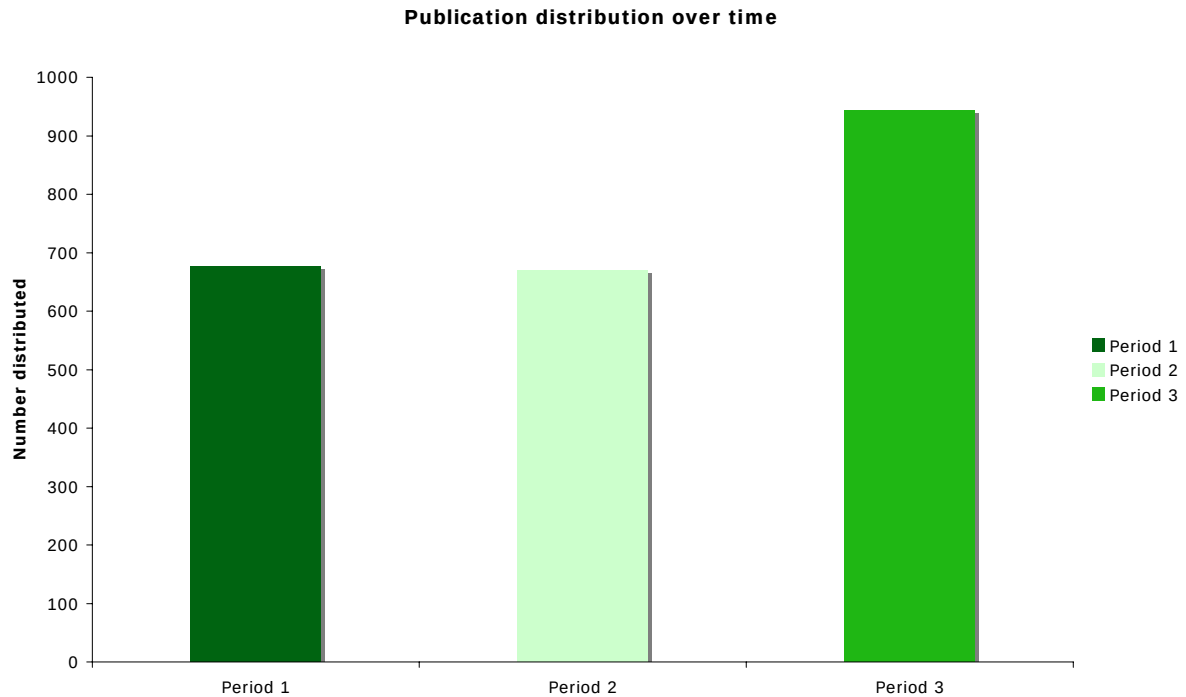
Figure 3 shows a full representation of each publication with an average number of 104 distributed per publication. Several publications have been excluded as no copies were distributed.

Figure 3:



The drought is likely to have had an impact on publication distribution as several hosts reported low customer numbers during the drought period. The first four months of the six month project period experienced severe drought and this followed 4 years of below average rainfall. **Figure 4** shows the lower distribution numbers during the dry period with an increase corresponding to Spring rains in late August and early September.

Figure 4: Publication removals during the three assessment periods (period 1 was April-June 2005, period 2 July-August 2005 and period 3 September –November 2005).



RDU Surveys

Project officers conducted informal interviews of both hosts and customers at each location during the final visit in November.

Hosts were asked:

- Were the display stands/ publications well received by customers?
- Did they generate any interest or discussion with staff?
- Did the displays affect your business in any way?
- Would you be willing to keep part of the display available for continued environmental publication?

The stands were well received by customers particularly in Hall and Crookwell, although they didn't generate much discussion with staff. Most hosts thought the stand's impact was negligible on business although one commented on the space taken up, however all hosts agreed to continue using the stands for environmental publications, if maintained by a local group.

Customers were asked (although low customer numbers resulted in few comments):

- Have you utilized any information from this stand over the past 6 months?
- If yes, what particular topic or publications?
- What sort of publications would you like to see – local only, technical guides or resource guide?
- Do you think these sorts of displays are of value in these outlets?

The few customers available for comment at the time of the visit from project staff commented on taking publications, finding both material and the display program as valuable and useful. All customers referred to locally relevant and practical material as most useful to display in these stands with topics ranging from birds, weeds, salt and the Lyndfield Park publication mentioned specifically.

Project Evaluation

RDU Advantages:

- The customers/audience represents a broad spectrum of the farming community.
- Draws information to the attention of a wide array of rural land managers.
- Customers can access information in a private and informal manner.
- The RDU design was compact and capable of carrying a number of publications and being non intrusive to hosts.
- The total number of publications distributed in a short period through a limited number of outlets was impressive.
- High uptake of locally produced publications.

RDU Disadvantages:

- The project was relatively labour intensive to maintain the displays. This is largely due to the time required for initial collation and collection of publications, travel distances (500km/visit) and stocktaking.
- While the collective numbers of publications are impressive the individual numbers of each publication in each store numbers is relatively low.
- Despite signage, some customers were unaware that publications were free.
- Low customer traffic resulted in few customer surveys undertaken during final visits.
- Low uptake of national, state and broader regional and technical publications.
- Subsequent usage of “broader” publications such as catalogues to access further information sources is unknown.

Future of RDUs

On completion of the trial, hosts are able to keep the stands and Greening Australia has negotiated ongoing access to the display units with store managers. A request has been made for access of up to half of the unit for NRM and landcare publications (8 slots).

Greening Australia has partnered the Upper Murrumbidgee Catchment Coordinating Committee (UMCCC) which is made up of local Landcare, environmental and government groups in an ‘Adopt a Display’ program. Community groups and nominated individuals have been encouraged to adopt a local RDU and continue to organise for publications to be displayed. RDUs will continue to play an on-going role in disseminating environmental information to the community.

Conclusions

- It is difficult to know how persistent drought affected the project outcomes as customer numbers were reported to be low by several hosts.
- The RDU style of information dissemination is probably more suited to publications that deal with local and practical issues.
- Any project of this nature needs to consider resourcing issues (time, labour and free publications)
- It is difficult to determine the success of the project from a cost / benefit ratio however more than 2000 publications were distributed to a predominantly rural audience that may not have otherwise reached them.
- It is difficult to determine the impact of those publications as there are inherent difficulties associated with informal social surveying.
- Overall the project represents an important trial and lesson for information dissemination, particularly revealing some popular topics such as birds, paddock, trees and general farm management and the potential for rural outlets to perform a role in information transfer.

The project highlights the difficulties in getting information out to the rural sector particularly those outside Landcare and environmental networks which are regularly exposed to NRM information. It is also a reminder that we need to resource information dissemination as an equal part of the PRODUCTION – PUBLICATION – DISSEMINATION product cycle. Given ongoing resources, there could be potential for proactive hosts of rural supply outlets to play a greater role in directing people to information and possibly setting up and managing RDUs independently.

Longer term displays, using publication material specifically produced and targeted to the local region are recommended for trial in other regions, with ongoing resources to replace publication stocks and monitor usage of the material.