

## **Landcare Soils for Life Speech- Rob Dulhunty**

### **Acknowledgements**

I would just like to begin by acknowledging the dignitaries we have here today.

- Senator the Honourable Joe Ludwig, Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and Minister Assisting on Queensland Flood Recovery.
- Former Governor General of the Commonwealth of Australia: Major General Michael Jeffrey. Michael Jeffrey is also Chairman of Soils for Life and Australia's first advocate for soil health.
- Senator Barnaby Joyce, Shadow Minister for Regional Development, Local Government and Water
- The Member for New England, Mr Tony Windsor MP
- The duty MLC for this region, Scot Macdonald.

I would like to thank Soils for Life for giving me the opportunity to speak here today. I would also like to thank Tim Wright for hosting this event and I would also like to thank Southern New England Landcare for working so hard to arrange this day.

### **Introduction**

The importance of soil as a key natural resource was brought to the fore by Landcare a generation ago. And with the Soils for Life program under the guidance Major General Michael Jeffrey, soils are once again being put on the agenda. Soils are the key to productivity and sustainability in agriculture. Soils are the filters for our water and the storage banks for carbon in the challenges of addressing climate change.

The Soils for Life program aims to identify leading practice in regenerative landscape management and encourage the adoption of these regenerative landscape management practices as the norm across the agricultural landscape.

The question I would like to address today is how do we ensure programs like Soils for Life are successful in their breadth and take-up? The answer to that lies in investing in human capital.

### **The role of Human Capital in Natural Resource Management**

The key factor to address landscape change is people. Without the right social structures and attributes in a rural community it doesn't matter how well designed or intentioned your program is, it just won't achieve success. Three elements of human capital are critical precursors to successful natural resource management.

The first element of human capital that is necessary is Trust. Without Trust between government and the landholder nothing will be achieved. This includes Trust to allow someone on your property, Trust that the problem has been well diagnosed, Trust that you will get support for your activities in the long term and Trust that when you sign on the bottom line you won't be left hanging.

The second element of human capital that is necessary is Connectedness. That is, how connected people and organisations are to each other within a community. Without connectedness a farmer will never hear about the best solutions to improve their management, they will never learn what services

and support is available for them and they won't get either the peer pressure or reassurance to take the leap into new practices.

Trust and Connectedness go hand in hand with the final element of human capital: Ownership. The community need to own the issues AND also own the solutions if we are to succeed in addressing natural resource decline. They need to agree with the government on what the issues are, agree on what the best pathways to solving the problem.

The Landcare model has been a key pathway to trust, connectedness and ownership for the last 25 years. Landcare groups often form to address a communal issue: In the Central west, this was salinity; in the Monaro it was serrated tussock; and here in New England it was tree decline. Over time these groups grow and as does the diversity of interests of the group. They own their problems. They work to find solutions their way. They innovate. They seek grants and start fixing the problems and in doing so they build trust between government and the landholders. Landcare groups and their staff act with government, not as government, and in doing so helps gain the trust of farmers.

In building a Landcare group people talk to one another; neighbours talk across boundaries; people with similar issues talk to each other; and a network is formed across the landscape and the community becomes connected.

The Landcare model can build a trusting connected community that owns and shares the problems. The community becomes investment ready. It is ready to share ideas, technologies and embrace new programs from government, from academia and from industry. 'Soils for Life' is able to be here today with 100 people because in New England the Landcare network is strong.

## **Policy certainty**

To maintain these elements of human capital we need three things: policy certainty, goodwill from government and sufficient and steady funding arrangements.

We are going through major reforms at the moment the largest of these is the creation of Local Land Services bodies here in NSW. But first I want to touch on a Federal program. The Regional Landcare Facilitator program has been a long-running and successful approach to strengthening Landcare networks and building bridges between all levels of government and the wider Landcare community. I want to thank the Australian Minister for Primary Industries for his commitment to continue this program. The Landcare movement is hoping that when the final decision is made that these positions continue to be hosted in community organisations. This would maintain the trust and ownership of natural resource management issues in our communities.

As you all would know we going through reforms with establishment of the Local Land Services organisations. Landcare NSW is responding to this development to make them as Landcare-friendly as possible.

We have already had a number of wins on behalf of landcarers including:

- Embedding Landcare as a key partner in the process,
- The establishment of the reference panel, which I am on, was a Landcare suggestion,
- Skills-based requirements for all board positions,
- The continuation of the existing Catchment Action Plans (which we have all contributed to) and the expansion of these plans to cover other LLS activities such as biosecurity,

- The move to one audit body to cover all LLS activities to prevent creating silos in the new bodies,
- An internal review of the successes and failures of the CMAs in building human capital,
- Strong representation to maintain catchment boundaries (where the community wants them)

The challenge has been twofold. One level of uncertainty has been moving from an established relationship between Landcare and CMAs to one between Landcare and LLS that is currently without definition. The other challenge has been money.

Natural Resource Management funding in NSW has fallen into a budget vortex. The Department has been forced by Treasury to rebid for funding for NRM action. So whilst funding for some staff and administration is locked into the LLS reforms, the funding for ongoing NRM action is up in the air. This means when the state government is asked in parliament is asked are the government walking away from NRM action, they can't answer the question. This has made it challenging for the Federal government to lock in their investment. So right now we have two-thirds of the future NSW NRM budget unknown.

The Landcare movement is the only constituency to have mobilised to stop the loss of nearly \$65 million from rural NSW: Not farming bodies, not environment groups. In a way, this has marked the maturing of the landcare movement as a standalone constituency. Our mobilisation has made it incredibly challenging for the NSW government to withdraw from this area. Because of this, I am now confident that this will be resolved. But I would call for both the state and federal governments to speed up their negotiation and provide certainty for us all.

Every NRM policy reform transition ever undertaken in Australia has had a poor transition period that has impacted badly on Landcare communities and eroded social capital. We would like very much for this to be the first time there was not a failed transition.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the need to better manage our natural resources is self-evident. The need for programs like Soils for Life has never been more important. The critical question is how we can make sure communities are ready to engage. The answer is strong Landcare networks that build human capital through trust, ownership and connectedness.

We are going through a suite of reforms that are impacting on us at the moment. I want you all to know that Landcare NSW is in there fighting to make sure that they are to the benefit not the detriment of our movement.

I thank you for your time.