

DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR A LAND STEWARDSHIP CERTIFICATION SYSTEM

The design of a stewardship system should be driven by the need to improve environmental outcomes, strengthen sustainability and maximise benefit-cost ratio for all participants. Fortunately, these considerations lead to the same design features.

Design principle 1. Stewardship system(s) should positively influence on the on-going management decisions of land managers.

Landholder priorities are what determine outcomes as virtually all on-farm activities affect environmental outcomes. On-farm activities are funded primarily by landholders. Hence to be effective stewardship systems need to influence the impacts of decisions made by landholders. Public funding of narrowly conceived activities not affecting core business is unlikely to be effective.

Identifying the positive and negative environmental impacts of individual landholder activities should be an essential building block for improving the efficacy of any stewardship system. Adopting this as a design principle empowers the landholder, strengthens participation, and leads to continuing improvement.

Design principle 2. Stewardship system(s) should provide support for continuous improvement in environmental outcomes.

There is a compelling case for supporting continuous improvement in environmental outcomes. At the same time there are also compelling reasons why past and current performance should be recognised. Both these requirements can be accommodated by recognising past and current performance as a determinant of eligibility of participation and/or in determining differential degrees of benefit flow.

Design principle 3. Stewardship system(s) should be nationally applicable.

There are political, equity and effectiveness reasons why there should be open and universal access to a voluntary stewardship program. The greater the participation then the greater the environmental benefit, the greater is the political and community support for the system and the lower the overhead costs. Systems that are not nationally applicable do not fit with national and international foods and fibre supply chains and with the national nature of supply chains for farm inputs.

Design principle 4. Stewardship system(s) should have ecological integrity.

The default position for environment programs appears to be to focus on an element of the environment which is prominent for a particular agro-ecological location. Such reductionist approaches, for instance ones focused only on biodiversity or climate change, are unlikely to deal effectively with environmental interactions and interdependencies. These interactions and interdependencies usually are not fully understood highlighting the need to adopt precautionary holistic strategies.

Design principle 5. Stewardship system(s) should have spatial integrity.

It is important for stewardship systems to have spatial integrity that is they should deal whole-of-farm in a landscape-linked fashion. Being whole-of-farm is particularly important as about two thirds of farmers producing about two thirds the value of food, fibre and foliage products operate two or more industries. For instance, only about ten percent of cotton and beef is produced on cotton only or beef only properties respectively.

Being whole-of-farm is a critical factor for several reasons including:

- To avoid the duplication and cost escalations inherent in partial approaches
- Dealing with only part of the farm creates ecologically artificial boundaries and complicates landscape wide considerations.

Design principle 6. Stewardship system(s) should have a positive benefit-cost ratio.

A voluntary stewardship system will not be adopted and /or sustained unless the benefits to individual participant landholders and other agricultural system operators are greater than the costs. This requires the stacking of benefits potentially from, for instance in the farm sector, improved asset value, improved productivity, improved self-esteem, improved market access and possibly premiums, eligibility to government support and improved resilience and social connectedness.

Design principle 7. Stewardship system(s) should be able to encompass multiple credence factors.

Credence factors are those not evident in the product or from the consumption of the product. When credence factors such as the nature of the production system, employment conditions, environmental impacts and animal welfare are deemed to be important there is a need for their status to be determined by a verification process.

Design principle 8. Stewardship system(s) should be credible for all parties.

Credibility revolves around the themes of transparency, stakeholder engagement, traceability and the objective nature of administrative, review and accreditation and audit processes.

Design principle 9. Stewardship system(s) should be nationally and internationally recognised.

Besides delivering critical on-property benefits the stewardship system(s) should give landholders access to off-property benefits in particular from national and international agri-business chains. This can be achieved by application of internationally recognized management processes combined with outcomes specified to meet the particular requirements of individual land holdings.

Design principle 10. Stewardship system(s) should be sufficiently flexible to deliver on varying additional requirements of governments, industry and community partners.

The core stewardship system should be nationally applicable across all landholdings. However it should enable landholders to address varying requirements of governments, industry and community partners and accommodates changes to those requirements.

Stewardship systems need to be landholder focused, leave property level data in the ownership of the landholder and ideally be:

- Designed by experienced land managers and other specialists in ecology, agribusiness, software development, public policy and governance
- Led by innovative land managers
- Delivered in a competitive environment by accredited trainers and auditors
- Processes, standards and certification maintained by a body independent of industry and government and
- Supported by industry organisations, governments and community, corporate and environmental organisations and First Nations.

Land Management Alliance

(AgForce, Queensland Farmers' Federation, Australian Land Management Group, Southern Queensland Landscapes, Lock the Gate Alliance)

15 March 2021