



## Environmental Champions Program Overview

### - An initiative of the Rice Industry

The **voluntary** Environmental Champions program is an innovative improvement program designed by farmers for farmers! The five level achievement program aims to **recognise growers** for their environmental stewardship, while combining all existing regional environmental programs, best management practices and requirements of relevant government agencies and irrigation bodies into a **streamline process**.

The five level program has been described as “a one-stop shop, a neat package to work towards environmental and productive sustainability for the rice industry” (Helen Dalton, Yenda rice farmer). It aims to demonstrate the link between environmental stewardship and improved business productivity, as well as links with farm economics, trade and market opportunities.

The Environmental Champions Program, designed for **rice based farming systems**, is unique in the degree of cooperation it has had in its development. Every element within the program has the collective approval by all irrigation bodies within the rice growing regions, government agencies (ie. those managing natural resources, wildlife conservation, agricultural extension), rice systems research, catchment management, non-government bodies, local green groups, RGA staff and most importantly – farmers!

The program will provide recognition **of grower's efforts, achieve on farm benefits** and lead to **regional landscape improvement** – working towards a sustainable rice industry for future generations.

#### Why was the program designed?

The development of the program has been driven by rice growers. Three major reasons behind this drive are:

1. the **desire to leave a legacy** for future generations at a farm and industry level.
2. to **change the perception** of the industry to one of environmental leadership, through demonstrated environmental change and **recognition for environmental stewardship** already in place.
3. to **streamline** the ever increasing complex demands of environmental policy and legislation to a more simplified and achievable process.

#### The program structure

In brief, each level outlined below contains different actions to be undertaken to gain credit for that level.

##### Level 1: Basic Industry Standards

Entry level involves a range of legislative and policy targets. Most farmers will find they are already undertaking some of these actions. Activities will include chemical training & storage, irrigation education, meeting crop delivery standards and irrigation licence requirements and no net loss of native vegetation.

##### Level 2: Planning for Beyond Industry Standards

The second level is about planning and establishing strategies that will enable responsible environmental management. Activities will include identifying risks on farm, better water use efficiency, ground monitoring, off farm drainage, planning (including biodiversity), improved stubble management and undertaking a whole farm plan.

##### Level 3: Putting Plans into Action & Enhancing Biodiversity on Farm

The third level is about putting those plans developed in Level 2 into practice. A large focus of Level 3 is on biodiversity activities. Activities will include farm planning, biodiversity recovery, addressing salinity and soils issues and undertaking some greenhouse reduction activities (which will lead to cost savings on farm).

#### Level 4: Trade, Innovation & Eco- Efficiencies

This level will incorporate activities that provide a financial return to the grower as well as an environmental return. Activities will include energy efficiency, renewable use and generation, addressing waste and water and reducing greenhouse gases.

#### Level 5: Regional Efforts towards Catchment Sustainability

This level will involve farmers partnering or working in conjunction with others to achieve environmental outcomes for the whole region, not just on farm. Activities may include looking at land use options on a regional scale, engaging in carbon & salinity trade and addressing other landscape and river issues.

*Note: All activities will be reviewed during the trial period for their relevance to the program, and will be adapted/alterd where necessary.*

#### What are the potential benefits of becoming an Environmental Champion? (ie. what's in it for you – the growers!)

There are many potential benefits to participating in the program, with examples including;

- ✓ More efficient practices leading to **real cost savings** on farm
- ✓ **Accessing natural resources** in the future
- ✓ To be recognised as part of a **leading** commodity industry
- ✓ **Building your capacity** to improve your legacy on farm and within the region
- ✓ Improve the standing of the industry and your livelihood in the eyes of the public and in the international market place
- ✓ Being **proactive** in meeting the challenges of increasing environmental demands being placed on all agricultural commodities.

#### The implementation of the Environmental Champions Program.

The Environmental Champions program has been in development over the last two years. We are now at a stage of trialling the first three levels of the program.

Over the next year we are asking number of growers to volunteer to participate in cluster trial groups (seven to ten farmers in each) across each rice-growing region. Trial participants will have the opportunity to 'fine tune' the program through feedback, to ensure the program is adaptable, realistic and relevant to all growers within the rice growing industry.

Eight cluster groups will begin the first levels of the program shortly. Our aim is to roll the program out industry wide early next year, giving all rice growers an opportunity to become involved in the program. Our targets set by growers at the Ricegrowers' Association Annual Conference last year in Renmark are that 50% of growers have achieved Level 1 of the program by the end of 2004.

The trial cluster groups will be located in the following areas:

Murrami (MI)	Wakool (MIL)
Yenda (MI)	Bullatale Creek Landholders (DLWC Murray)
Whitton (MI)	Berriquin (MIL)
Leeton (MI)	

The Environmental Champions Program will also work closely with CICL through their involvement in the Environmental Stewardship Program to share learnings from the two trials.