

# RIDGELINES TO RIVERS

## overview of the project

When an ecologist visited the Tarabandra area south of Gundagai five years ago he described the remnant woodland there as one of the most degraded box woodlands in NSW. Comprising White Box (*Eucalyptus albens*), Yellow Box (*E. melliodora*) and Blakely's Red Gum (*E. blakelyi*) this community had become highly fragmented through land clearing. The Tarabandra Ridgelines to Rivers project brought together a dedicated group of landholders who have together restored 25 ha of degraded habitat and created nearly 35 ha of new wildlife habitat across their properties. The newly established box gum grassy woodlands provide a network of corridors that run from the ridgelines of the Tarabandra hills to the riparian corridors of the Murrumbidgee and Tumut rivers.



Students help create new wildlife corridors.

## how the project was carried out

The project began with a cross property planning workshop that helped landholders understand the principles of landscape function and connectivity. The group then transferred these principles to their own properties and prioritised sites for action.

Landholders came together at the end of each year to evaluate the success of their project activities, to discuss methods of improving on-ground outcomes and to identify gaps in the landscape. Landholders negotiated between themselves to decide where new stands of vegetation could be best placed to fill these gaps and create linkages across the landscape.



New plantings complement restoration works in degraded box gum grassy woodland

A number of stakeholders were engaged to assist with the physical task of creating the new wildlife corridors. This included Gundagai High School, St Josephs Primary School, Murrumbidgee CMA, Landcare NSW Community in Landscapes project, and the local Landcare nursery.

As the benefits of the project became apparent more landholders became involved each year. Linkages were created over 13 adjoining properties and 16 landholder agreements developed by the Riverina Highlands Landcare Network were signed. Over 16 km of new fencing has been installed to protect the new plantings.

## outcomes now and in the future

The project has successfully inspired and mobilised the Tarabandra community to work together at a landscape level to restore this endangered woodland community. Sixty hectares of box gum grassy woodland has been restored or enhanced creating future stepping stones for the movement of fauna between the hills and the floodplains of the district. Some sites were not near existing

bushland, so rather than undertaking bush regeneration, 18,000 native tubestock were planted and maintained to create new habitat.

This project is one of the few examples where works have been carried out at a landscape level to restore box gum grassy woodlands in NSW, and it appears to be the first project to focus on linking box gum grassy woodlands in the Riverina Highlands. This is one of the key actions required for recovery of this endangered community.

The success of the project has resulted in the group securing another two years of funding through Landcare Australia to further extend the reach of the project.

## benefits, challenges & lessons learned

The success of Ridgelines to Rivers has been underpinned by the cooperative approach of neighbouring landholders. To encourage farmers to commit to the project a number of agencies were engaged to provide technical support and scientific credibility. These included Landcare NSW, Murrumbidgee CMA and Department of Primary Industries. A well respected farmer then championed the project and encouraged his neighbours to participate.

An unexpected benefit of the project has been the amount of interest that has been generated in growing locally native plants. There is now a regular group of volunteers who work at the Landcare Nursery to grow and manage native tubestock for community plantings.

The project was affected by extreme climate events ranging from prolonged dry spells to significant flooding. During the dry years the landholders found that the preparation of new sites benefitted from a greater depth of soil ripping. To adapt to the floods, the project had to revise the fencing plan, to ensure that new fences were parallel to the flow of water to minimise damage and loss.