

State of the catchments 2010

Soil condition

Hunter–Central Rivers region

State Plan target

By 2015 there is an improvement in soil condition.

Background

Soil condition is the ability of soil to deliver a range of essential services, including habitat for soil biota, nutrient cycling, water retention and primary production. Soil condition is commonly referred to as 'soil health' by land managers; however the term 'soil condition' is used in this report to ensure consistency with other targets. For this report, current condition is compared to reference or natural condition using program baseline data, existing data and expert knowledge.

A detailed technical report describes the methods used to derive the information contained in this report. At the time of publication of the *State of the catchments (SOC) 2010* reports, the technical reports were being prepared for public release. When complete, they will be available on the DECCW website: www.environment.nsw.gov.au/publications/reporting.htm.

Note: All data on natural resource condition, pressures and management activity included in this SOC report, as well as the technical report, was collected up to January 2009.

Soil condition monitoring program

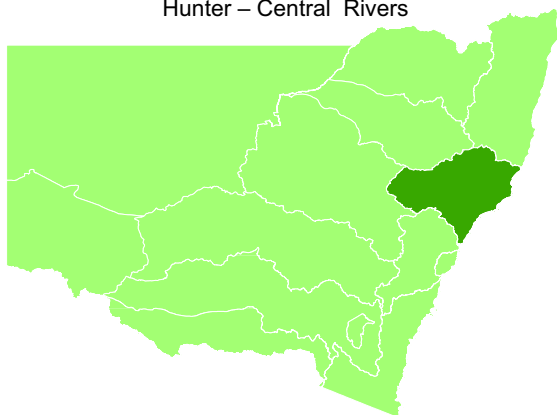
The principal current objective of the program is to create a baseline against which future changes in soil condition can be measured.

Soil condition has been assessed for 124 priority soil monitoring units (SMUs) across the state. An SMU is a large tract of land with a predictable pattern of soils, where changes in soil condition and land management can be observed. Up to 10 SMUs were jointly selected within each region by DECCW and catchment management authority (CMA) staff, based upon their area, importance, pressures and vulnerability.

A network of permanent monitoring sites is being established within the SMUs across the state. Fieldwork commenced in June 2007 and, state-wide, 830 sites have been sampled as of this reporting date. This report focuses on current condition and uses soil monitoring data available from 700 of those sites and laboratory data available for 500 sites. Data collection and laboratory testing is continuing. The report is a brief summary of available results. A separate technical report contains more detailed information on methods and references.

Map of the catchment

Hunter – Central Rivers



The distribution of SMUs in the Hunter–Central Rivers region is shown in Figure 1. The SMUs collectively covered 9900 km² or about 28 per cent of the catchment.

Assessment

Within each SMU, up to 10 representative soil monitoring sites were established. Seventy-five sites were established in the Hunter–Central Rivers region. Where possible, sites were paired to reflect differences in land-use on similar soils.

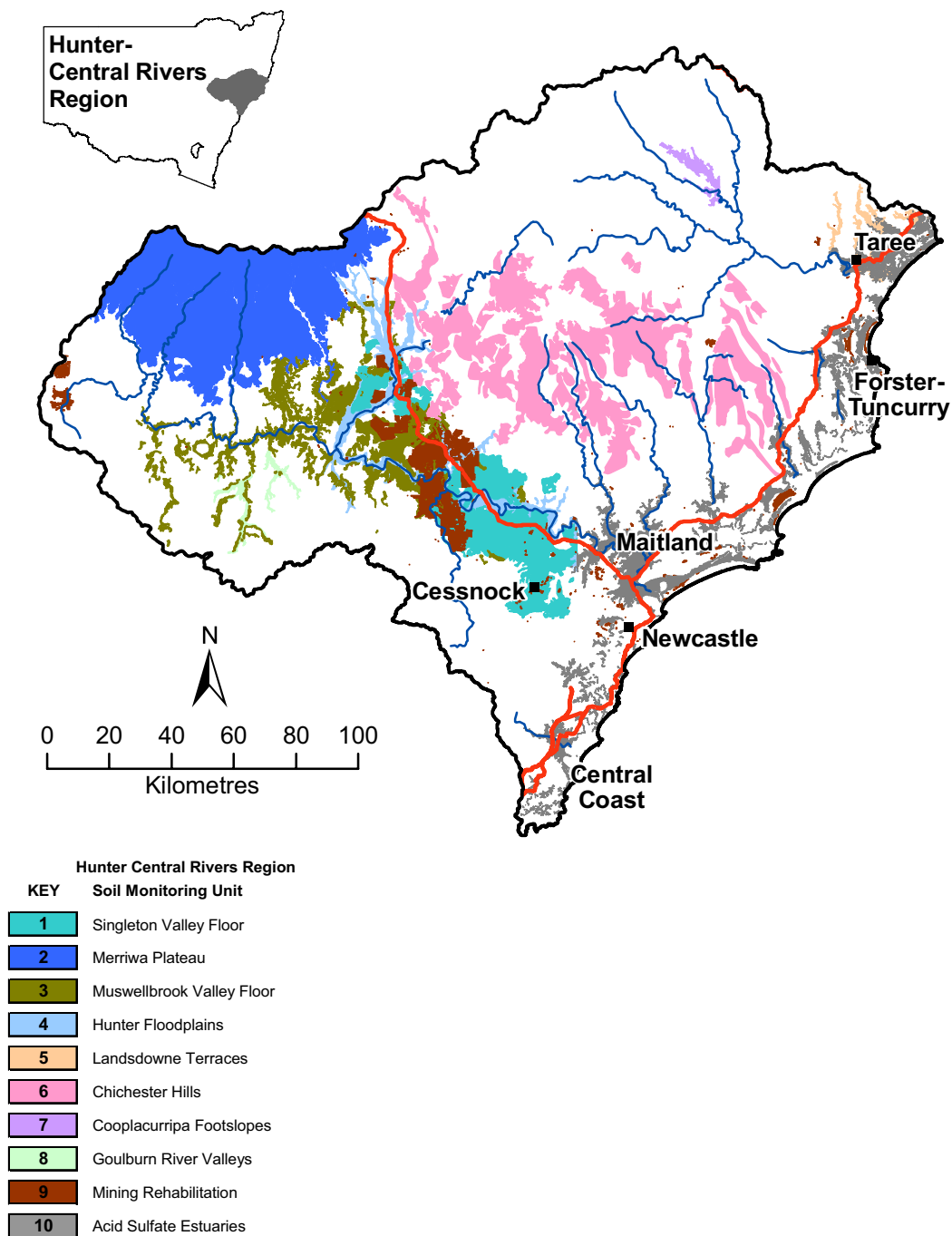


Figure 1 Location and extent of SMUs in the Hunter–Central Rivers region

Condition











Soil condition indicators are measured soil properties that respond to soil pressures. Indicators were assessed using a combination of field observations, field measurements and laboratory analyses. Details concerning the indicators and evaluation methods are found in the technical report.

Soil condition indicator classes are based on the degree of deterioration of soil function against a reference or 'natural' condition, determined from measurements in undisturbed sites, published literature and modelling.

The **soil condition index** is a measure of the condition of the soil compared to reference conditions. It is the average value of all relevant condition indicator classes within an SMU or region. Results of the assessment of the soil condition index for each SMU in the Hunter–Central Rivers region are given in Table 1 and in Figure 2.

To show the **range** of values, a pie chart is provided in Table 1 to show the proportion of classes. Trend in condition is not available as only baseline data at one point in time has been collected as of the date of this report. As a surrogate, an **expected trend** in soil condition is provided based on the degree to which land management is within capability (see the land management state of the catchments (SOC) report). **Data confidence** is based on how the age, compliance with baseline protocols, replication and representativeness of the data can be used to determine current condition.

Table 1 Soil condition of SMUs in the Hunter–Central Rivers region

Soil monitoring unit	Soil monitoring unit name Soil types and monitored land use	Average soil condition index ^a	Range of indices ^b	Expected trend in soil condition ^c	Lowest scoring soil condition indicators and index ^d	Data sources ^e and confidence ^f
1	Singleton Valley Floor Brown, Grey and Red Kurosols and Sodosols. Woodlands and grazing.	3.0		↔	Soil salinity 1.5	K, S and B Medium
2	Merriwa Plateau Well-structured Red Ferrosols and Black Vertosols. Cropping and grazing.	4.1		↔	Sheet erosion 3.0	K, S and B Medium
3	Muswellbrook Valley Floor Red and Yellow shallow Dermosols and Sodosols. Grazing and unused sheet eroded land.	3.1		↔	Soil salinity 1.5	K, S and B Medium
4	Hunter Floodplains Black Dermosols. Cropping and lucerne production.	3.8		↑	Soil salinity 2.3	K, S and B Medium
5	Landsdowne Terraces Red and Yellow Kurosols. Beef grazing.	4.4		↔	Organic carbon 3.5	K, S and B Medium
6	Chichester Hills Deep Yellow Tenosols and Kurosols. Forestry.	4.2		↓	Sheet erosion 2.0	K and S Low
7	Cooplacurrica Footslopes Yellow Kurosols and Sodosols. Grazing.	3.5		↔	Sheet erosion 1.0	K, S and B Low
8	Goulburn River Valley Floor Shallow Brown Dermosols and Chromosols. Grazing.	4.3		↔	Soil salinity 3.3	K, S and B Medium
9	Mined Landscapes Shallow Spolic Anthrosols. Rehabilitated pasture and woodland.	3.8		↔	Soil salinity 1.5	K, S and B High
10	Acid Sulfate Estuaries Hydrosols and Tenosols. Beef grazing.	4.3		↔	Soil salinity 2.9	K, S and B Medium

Legend for Table 1

a Soil condition index:

4.6 – 5.0	Very good	No loss of soil function. Either no deterioration or an improvement on reference condition
3.6 – 4.5	Good	Slight loss of soil function. Noticeable but not significant deterioration against reference condition
2.6 – 3.5	Fair	Noticeable loss of soil function. Noticeable deterioration against reference condition
1.6 – 2.5	Poor	Significant loss of soil function. Considerable deterioration against reference condition
<1.5	Very poor	Profound loss of soil function. Severe deterioration against reference condition
	No data	Not included for change monitoring. Information available in support documents

b Range of indices: pie chart shows variation in soil condition indices for the different indicators in each SMU

c Expected trend in soil condition, based on degree to which land is managed within its capability:

- ↑ Soil condition is improving
- ↔ Soil condition shows no change
- ↓ Soil condition is declining

d Lowest scoring soil condition indicators and index: gives the indicator(s) of most concern in the SMU, with the associated index

e Data source:

- B Baseline data for soil condition – from field and laboratory measurements
- S New South Wales Soil and Land Information System (SALIS)
- K Expert knowledge, publications, maps and reports
- M Modelled data

f Data confidence:

- High Derived from representative sites in the baseline study, compared with data from SALIS and evaluated using expert knowledge
- Medium Derived from incomplete baseline and/or SALIS and has been evaluated using expert knowledge
- Low Derived from modelling or expert knowledge

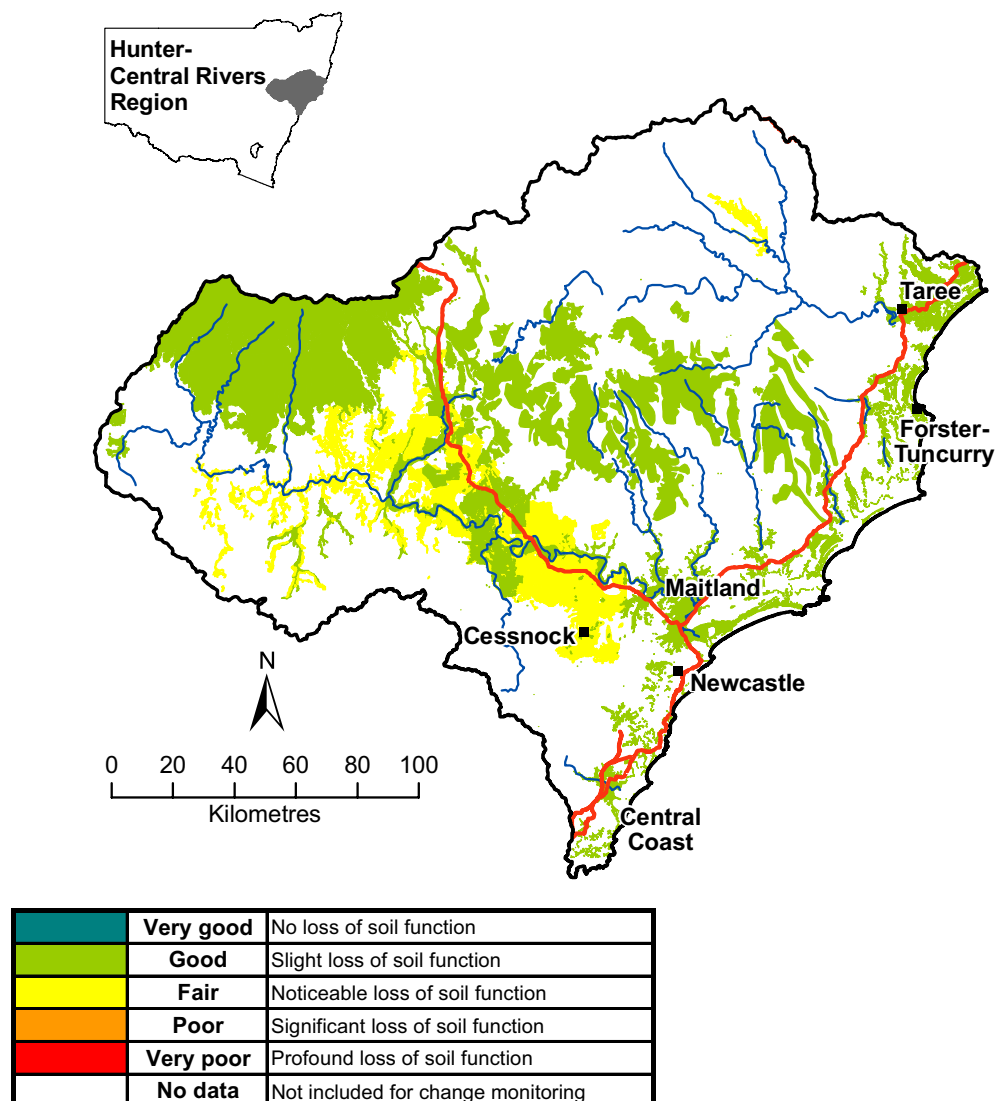












Figure 2 Soil condition index for SMUs within the Hunter–Central Rivers region

Table 2 shows soil condition, by indicator for all SMUs in the Hunter–Central Rivers region. A pie chart is provided to show the proportion and **range** of classes. As for Table 1, **expected trend** is based on the degree to which land management is within capability (see land management SOC report). **Data confidence** is based on how the age, compliance with baseline protocols, replication and representativeness of the data can be used to determine each indicator.

Table 2 Soil condition indicators in the Hunter–Central Rivers region

Soil condition by indicator	Soil condition indicator index ^a	Range of indices ^b	Expected trend in soil condition ^c	SMUs with poor or very poor condition ^d	Data sources and confidence ^e
Erosion - sheet Water erosion, predominantly rain splash and non-concentrated flows. Erodes topsoil and reduces terrestrial and aquatic ecosystem function and productivity.	3.1		↔	3, 6, 7, 9	K, M and B Medium
Erosion - gully Water erosion of topsoil and subsoil by concentrated overland flows. Reduces land management options and reduces terrestrial and aquatic ecosystem function and productivity.	4.3		↔	-	K and B High
Erosion - wind Wind erosion of topsoil and subsoil by the actions of wind. Reduces land management options and reduces terrestrial and aquatic ecosystem function and productivity.	5.0		↑	-	M and B Medium
Acidity Soil pH is a major indicator of soil chemical health. Declines without adaptive management practices such as addition of sufficient lime. Associated with erosion, structure and carbon decline.	4.4		↔	-	K, S and B High
Organic carbon Prime biological determinant of soil health. Sensitive to land management practices including those that sequester carbon by plants from the atmosphere.	3.7		↔	3, 4	K, S and B High
Soil structure Architectural arrangement of soil particles and voids. Governs soil water and gas exchange. Prime determinant of soil physical health.	3.8		↔	-	K, S and B High
Coastal acid sulfate soils Low-lying coastal soils formed in marine environments. Exposure and drainage may result in production of sulfuric acid into water bodies and profound ecosystem damage.	3.5		↔	-	K, S, M and B Medium
Soil salinity Build up of salt in the soil or on the ground surface. Potential to cause profound terrestrial and aquatic ecosystem damage including massive erosion.	2.9		↔	1, 3, 4, 9	K and B Low
Soil condition index for Hunter-Central Rivers region	3.8				
State soil condition index	3.7				

Legend for Table 2

a Soil condition indexes are scored using the same methods as Table 1

b Range of indices: pie chart shows variation in indices for the different SMUs for each indicator

c Expected trend in soil condition, based on degree to which land is managed within its capability:

- ↑ Soil condition is improving
- ↔ Soil condition shows no change
- ↓ Soil condition is declining

d SMUs with poor or very poor condition: gives the SMU numbers (see Figure 1) for which the indicator in question is rated poor or very poor (≤ 2.5)

e Data source and confidence: see legend for Table 1

Pressures

Land management practices are the primary pressure on soil condition and are dealt with in the SOC report on land management within capability.

Management activity

The management activity for the soil condition theme and the land management within capability theme is very similar, as both centre on promoting the adoption of sustainable land management practices by landholders.

Increasing the area of land being managed within its capability is one of NSW's natural resource management (NRM) targets as outlined in the NSW State Plan.

Addressing the target within the Hunter–Central Rivers region involves initiatives and programs at the state and regional levels that will ultimately bring about the adoption of best land capability-sensitive management practices by landholders.

State level

The NSW Government guides NRM through various legislation, policies, strategies and programs.

Legislation

The *Catchment Management Authorities Act 2003* established the 13 CMAs and continues to outline their broad responsibility for NRM in their regions. The *Soil Conservation Act 1938* provides for the conservation of soil resources; however, its role in effective soil management has diminished over time. Various other Acts provide direct and indirect mechanisms for soil protection and management, including the *Protection of the Environment Operations Act 1997*, *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979*, *Native Vegetation Act 2003* and the *Crown Lands Act 1989*.

Policies and strategies

The State Soils Policy (1987) outlines important principles for the protection and management of NSW soils. It was recently reviewed and is undergoing public consultation. Other significant state policies and strategies include:

- Total Catchment Management Policy (1987) – aims to ensure the coordinated use and management of land, water, vegetation and other natural resources on a catchment basis
- Sustainable Agriculture Policy (1998) – aims to facilitate a change in agricultural production in NSW towards ecologically and economically sustainable practices and farming systems
- NSW State Salinity Strategy (2000) – aims to slow down the increase in salinity and lay the foundations for future salinity management
- State Environmental Planning Policy (SEPP) Rural Lands (2008) – aims to facilitate the orderly and economic use and development of rural lands for rural and related purposes.

Programs

A number of relevant programs operate at the state level:

- *Monitoring, evaluation and reporting (MER) program* – DECCW is responsible for continuing its MER program and completing a baseline across all CMAs relating to soil condition and land management. The Australian Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry is funding a pilot program for national monitoring of water and wind erosion, soil acidification and soil carbon. The SoilWatch soil condition performance monitoring kit is being developed to complement and supplement MER surveillance monitoring throughout the state.
- *Soil and land-use mapping* – much of eastern and central NSW is covered by soil landscape mapping at 1:100,000 or 1:250,000; this is primarily undertaken by DECCW. Reconnaissance scale soil or land system mapping covers other areas. A program of detailed land-use mapping across the state is nearing completion
- *Assessment systems* – a number of soil and land assessment systems have recently been developed which will ultimately lead to more sustainable land management. These systems, which have primarily been developed by DECCW, include:
 - a system to assess the impact of various land management actions on soil condition
 - a land and soil capability (LSC) assessment system, with draft mapping completed across NSW
 - a soil and landscape constraint assessment system
 - the Tools2 (SLICK) modelling system, which allows for assessment of the impact on soils from different management options.
- *Information exchange and advice* – soil and landscape information and land management advice is provided through various publications, maps and databases (see www.environment.nsw.gov.au/soils/index.htm). The NSW Soil and Land Information System (SALIS) is run by DECCW and is intended as the single soil database for soil information in NSW. The Natural Resource Atlas (www.nratlas.nsw.gov.au) is used to access publicly available soil profile information. The NSW Land Management Database is being developed and distributed to CMAs throughout the state. Extension services that encourage sustainable land management practices by landholders are undertaken widely by Industry & Investment NSW (I&I) staff throughout the state.
- *Research* – research programs aimed at improving soil condition, productivity and sustainable land management practices are carried by various national and state institutions, including Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, universities, I&I, DECCW, rural industry bodies (eg Grains Research Development Corporation).

Regional level

The Hunter–Central Rivers Catchment Action Plan (CAP) is the key document that coordinates and drives the effort to improve natural resources across the region. It describes the whole-of-Government approach to soil condition and sustainable land management and provides direction for investment in NRM over the next 10 years. The Hunter–Central Rivers CAP can be found at www.hcr.cma.nsw.gov.au/articles/news.asp?news_id=15.

The CAP includes specific targets, with specific areas (hectares), that will address the broader state targets. These targets are achieved through the following:

Data collection

This involves the development of a baseline of soil information, with a focus on soil erosion and

dryland salinity data. Land management data will be collected over individual properties and added to the Land Management Database.

Planning

Priority issues are identified, as well as locations for improved land management and investment.

Collaboration

Partnerships are formed with farming organisations, industry groups, relevant government agencies (particularly DECCW, I&I, the Land and Property Management Authority), tertiary institutions, Landcare and similar community groups and individuals.

An example is Hunter–Central Rivers CMA's collaboration with DECCW to establish a number of demonstration sites showing the benefits of recycled organics soil conditioner and other mulch products, on soil condition. These are used to help stabilise actively eroding areas.

Awareness and skills raising

Training days and workshops are held, and guidelines and information sheets are produced on various topics.

Contracts and programs with landholders

Contracts have been developed with landholders to modify and improve land management practices.

Incentive programs, aimed at improving land management practices, have also been implemented. For example:

- The Hunter–Central Rivers CMA will engage with landholders through incentive programs on the treatment of priority soil erosion sites
- Under the Sustainable Agriculture Grants scheme, the Hunter–Central Rivers CMA is supporting landholders who wish to attend accredited property management and property planning courses. Financial support is also provided to these landholders who wish to implement their new skills on their property.

Continued monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring programs to assess progress towards the targets will continue under CMA and DECCW programs. For example, the Hunter–Central Rivers CMA is implementing the SoilWatch soil condition monitoring program that aims to demonstrate the long-term soil condition benefits of managing land appropriately.

Other programs and activities include:

- rehabilitation of priority saline subcatchments and actively-eroding areas, that directly affect downstream sensitive areas
- land management projects, funded by developer contributions (Section 94) to local government, eg the remediation of actively eroding soils at Doughboy Hollow, near Singleton
- enabling land managers to adopt practices that are more sustainable and suited to their properties' land capability. This is a key theme of many CMA projects.

Further details and examples of many of these activities are reported in recent annual reports of the CMA.

Other regional or local based bodies and programs that aid in improved land management include:

- local councils, through their compliance with the *Local Government Act 1993* and local or regional planning instruments such as local environmental plans and regional environmental plans
- Landcare groups that facilitate improved landholder knowledge and on-ground works
- universities that undertake research programs in the region
- coal companies, through their implementation of more sustainable grazing management on buffer land holdings that surround their mining operations.

Further reading

DECCW 2009, *Protocols for Soil Condition and Land Capability Monitoring*, prepared by Greg Bowman, Greg Chapman, Brian Murphy, Brian Wilson, Brian Jenkins, Terry Koen, Jonathan Gray, David Morand, Glenn Atkinson, Casey Murphy, Andrew Murrell and Humphrey Milford, Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water NSW, Sydney.

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DECCW 2010/441 ISBN 978 1 74232 754 9 November 2010

Cover photo: R Nicolai/DECCW – 'field of red dirt'