

# CASE STUDY

Northern Agricultural Catchments Council



## Re-greening the Coonderoo at Eagle Hill Farm Watheroo

### Introduction

Doug Joyce has a vision.

“I would like to fly over Eagle Hill and see it green when all about is brown. My father and I did this once in Victoria in the late sixties and it was terrific to see the result.”

Now 72, Doug hopes to do this again, and funding through the Northern Agricultural Catchments Council (NACC) to fence-off bushland and wetland is helping Doug to achieve his long-held goal.

But the path to green has not always been easy. From growing-up on a farm in Victoria, to a career in physiotherapy in Western Australia, Doug was always keen to find a bush block of his own. After searching the property classifieds for a few years, Doug finally settled-upon his goal, and purchased the 1,451 ha Eagle Hill Farm 5 kilometres north-west of Watheroo in 2013.

Eagle Hill had previously been owned by Carbon Conscious. They had established oil mallee plantations on the majority of the farm’s paddocks for carbon sequestration credits. The remainder of the farm contained sizeable areas of native bushland and wetlands, many enclosed by aging non-stock-proof fences.

### The Process

Doug made contact with NACC in 2014 – after hearing about NACC’s *Hidden Treasures* and *Rivers and Wetlands* incentive schemes. A site assessment was undertaken by NACC Natural Resource Management Officer (NRMO), Rodger Walker later in the year. “I was immediately impressed with the site, with its

incredible variety of landscapes and wetland features. It is surprising the property never became part of the National Park next door.”



Doug in front of his fenced Banksia woodland.

Initially Doug intended to fence-off the remnant Banksia woodland, but after discussing his long-term plans with NACC, a much larger and more ambitious fencing proposal was settled upon. This included 10.3 km of bush-protection fencing and 8.3 km of waterway fencing. A site management plan and management agreement was then drawn-up and duly signed.

With a plan in place, Doug and co-owner Andrew Garrett got stuck into work. Equipment was ordered, old rusted fence lines were pulled-up and removed, postholes were dug in rock-hard ground, and contractors were hired to assist. After a long hot, dry summer, plenty of sweat, and many long days, the fencing was complete.

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## Value of the Site

The value of a bushland fencing project such as this can never be understated. On a property like Eagle Hill Farm with its highly diverse landforms, geology and waterway/wetland features. The farm lies just east of the Darling Fault, down which the Coonderoo River flows, and includes extensive areas of sandplain, as well as a number of hills marking the western edge of the Darling Range. These hills are composed of a variety of rock types including Proterozoic Noondine Chert, sandstone and granite, which give rise to a diverse range of soil types. The hills form part of the watershed of the farm's naturally saline waterway ("Eagle Hill Creek") which flows down the western half of the farm to join the Coonderoo on the farm boundary. The Coonderoo forms part of the northern Moore River catchment.

The waterways fenced-off under this project protected 342 hectares of naturally saline and shallow creek floodplain, of variable width, winding through native cypress, melaleuca, eucalypt, samphire and banksia vegetation communities. The bushland fencing is also helping to protect 143 hectares of Banksia woodland and 67 hectares of shrublands and other woodlands on the prominent low hills and rocky outcrops.

The ecological connectivity value of the farm's bushland is considered extremely high – as the farm adjoins Watheroo National Park, which is a major bushland refuge and corridor. The farm's wetlands and soaks are also extremely beneficial to the area's local wildlife, particular birds. In recognition of this, the property was declared a Department of Parks and Wildlife *Land for Wildlife Site* in 2012.



Owners' favourite lake all full after the July rains.  
(Photo by A. Garrett 2015)

## Monitoring

On completion of the fencing works, an on-site inspection was conducted, and photo monitoring points were established to provide the basis for on-going monitoring and management action.

By chance, the on-site inspection (which was conducted on 1 August 2015) provided a unique opportunity to inspect the Eagle Hill Creek system immediately after one of its highest ever rainfall events (more than 90mm of rain was recorded on the previous day). NACC's hand-held water quality tester was consequently put to good use, and the landholder was not only able to see his waterway in full flood (which only happens once every 10-20 years or so) but also get some comprehensive water quality data.

"We were able to test the Coonderoo in full flood, which is a rare event, providing us with a rare sample – which was much lower in salinity than we thought," said Doug.

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Eagle Hill Creek in flood.

## The Future

Looking towards the future, Doug said he and co-owner Andrew have many plans for the farm. They hope to make the farm financially sustainable by grazing sheep and possibly implementing one or two small-scale agricultural ventures. They intend to improve the areas of the farm that are run-down or in need of repair. Fortunately, some inroads have already been made in this area, with the growth of the oil mallee stands reversing the impacts of waterlogging and salinity which have affected some of the floodplain area.

“What pleased us most was that, yes, while we did get funding assistance for the fencing and it was effective, it didn’t impact on our rights to the land,” said Doug. “And that gives us a lot of pride, and a great sense of inclusiveness in the project.”

“It was also great to have the services of NACC staff and their freely-given and excellent advice on things like plant types and soil grades,” said Doug. “Also inbuilt in this partnership is trust and respect, meaning that

no matter how farfetched one’s enquiries were, they were taken seriously, and responded to in full.”

NACC NRMO Rodger Walker said the organisation was proud to help Doug with his quest for sustainable agriculture, and to play a part in the restoration of Eagle Hill and the Coonderoo waterway.



Eagle Hill Creek with relatively low water levels.



Project fencing and site monitoring tags.

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## For more information:

Please contact NACC's main office on (08) 9938 0100, or via the website on <http://www.nacc.com.au/contact-us/>

For Biodiversity Program enquiries refer <http://www.nacc.com.au/biodiversity/>

Case Study by Rodger Walker, 2016.

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