

ACTION PLAN

September 2004

About this plan

This plan consolidates key actions recommended by the project's working group to support the redevelopment of the agricultural resource base of Gembrook and ensure a sustainable future for the area. It has been developed from specialist research and stakeholder discussions that have taken place as part of the Gembrook Rural Review since late 2003.

The recommended actions are presented first, followed by a summary of the process and information that went into them.

Recommended actions

(NB CSC= Cardinia Shire Council, VFF= Vic Farmers' Federation, CEC= Cardinia Environment Coalition, GRR= Gembrook Rural Review)

Theme	Actions	Responsibility
1. Attracting new industries, companies and lifestyle investors to the area		
Promote new productive land use opportunities	1.1 Establish a group to a) confirm the level of interest in a ' Gembrook Rural Expo ' and b) scope the content of this (if sufficient interest) with the overall aim of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • promoting the most promising new land use opportunities to local landowners and real estate agents (including examples of these in the local area) • marketing rural land in Gembrook to potential investors 	Yvonne Bennett, David Nickell, John Cascone, VFF with support from Gembrook Township Committee, CSC Economic Development Unit, and DPI
	1.2 Establish a clearinghouse for information on the most promising new land use opportunities and local contacts who can help provide links to new industries	VFF Gembrook, CSC Economic Development Unit
	1.3 Form an Investment Reference Group (including local agents recruited at the Expo and/or a separate briefing, and Monash University's Faculty of Marketing & Tourism, Berwick) to help develop an investment attraction plan for the area, and help broker land sales or leases with interested investors	CSC Economic Development Unit
Address soil constraints	1.4 Advocate, at the Federal level with candidates from all political parties, for the VFF's proposal to control PCN-affected properties and free up markets for non-affected properties	VFF Potato Growers' Council, CSC, DPI
	1.5 Produce a ' Living with Dieldrin ' brochure that clarifies the standards that apply to different types of land use – to reassure lifestyle landowners that there area no risks to human health in Gembrook	EPA (Jean Meaklim), DPI (Alan Ross)
	1.6 Host a research trial of ways to break down dieldrin in the soil (bio-remediation) by DPI Rutherglen	DPI, VFF, CSC Economic Development and Environment units

	1.7 Support establishment trials and/or track the latest developments in research on dieldrin uptake in green tea and other crops that are suited to Gembrook	DPI, VFF, CSC
	1.8 Take up the offer from DPI (Box Hill, Ellenbank and Wangaratta) of advice and assistance for property owners wanting to use dieldrin-affected properties for grazing . Could involve a 'refresher' seminar on DPI property management plans for interested landowners	VFF, landowners, DPI
Review planning framework	1.9 Recommend to the Minister for Planning a review by DSE of the planning framework for Gembrook so that investment in new, more intensive agricultural enterprises can be encouraged, and innovations in land management (such as the share farm model) can be trialled	GRR working group, CSC, local MP (Tammy Lobarto)
Provide resources	1.10 Appoint an agribusiness officer to support all the above actions (with Cadman Agribusiness Services retained as a source of advice and information in the interim)	CSC
2. Assisting potato growers to make decisions about their future		
Research alternative markets	2.1 Arrange a visit by growers' representatives to Greenlands Holdings, Ballarat, to look at a new, long-life processing technology for Sebago potatoes and to hear how local fresh market growers have managed problems similar to Gembrook's	VFF Growers' Council
Develop marketing strategy	2.2 Develop a marketing strategy for 'waste' potatoes not taken by local packers. Seek academic and student involvement from Monash, Berwick and Cadman Agribusiness Services	VFF Growers' Council
Provide financial and estate planning advice	2.3 Investigate the level of interest in including in the Gembrook Rural Expo a briefing by Centrelink, the Rural Finance Commission (FarmBi\$) and an estate planning advisor to raise awareness of the options available to retiring potato growers and help them plan for the future	(See Action 1.1 above)
Provide for elderly living	2.4 Facilitate the establishment of accommodation for older people in Gembrook to support retiring farmers who wish to leave their land without leaving the area and community	CSC Community Services

3. Enhancing environmental and landscape values		
<i>Build Landcare</i>	3.1 Seek funding for a Landcare officer for the catchment that includes Gembrook (options include: applying for a grant from the Catchment Mgmt Authority, or influencing the CMA's Regional Capital Investment Plan via a submission on the Regional Catchment Strategy)	Merle Mathisen, David Nickell, The Hills Ragwort & Landcare Group (Meinhard Holtz), St John's Hill Landcare group (Cockatoo) with support from CSC Environment Unit, and CEC
<i>Promote land rehabilitation</i>	3.2 Continue to track the State Government's proposed land rehabilitation initiatives (Bush Tender and Land Stewardship programs) and assess the potential viability of their implementation in Gembrook	CSC Environment Unit, CEC
	3.3 Pursue mechanisms to attract investment in revegetation and other rehabilitation initiatives such as Green Fleet	CSC Environment and Economic Development units
4. Building local support for and involvement in implementing the actions		
<i>Coordinate implementation of this plan</i>	4.1 Form a small local group to seek and co-ordinate community involvement in implementing this Action Plan	David Nickell, Township Committee
<i>Begin Community Strengthening Initiative (CSI)</i>	4.2 Begin the deferred CSI initiative as a means of gaining wider involvement in, and building on, the outcomes of the Rural Review (with a particular focus on issues concerning the township)	Township Committee, CSC Community Services

The remainder of this plan provides a summary of the Gembrook Rural Review project, the process that led to this Action Plan and key issues and aspirations relating to each theme.

Aims of the project

The objectives of the Gembrook Rural Review have been:

- To gain a thorough understanding of issues impacting on the use of rural land in Gembrook.
- To investigate alternative agricultural opportunities for the area.
- To develop a plan for the sustainable future use of rural land in Gembrook that responds to the vision and needs of the local community.
- To involve the local community and key stakeholders in the process of investigating issues and developing a plan for the future.

The primary focus of the Gembrook Rural Review has been on the land around Gembrook that has the red soil (tertiary volcanics).

The review process

The process to date has comprised two main stages:

Stage 1: Establishing the working group (26 November 2003) and identifying the scope of issues and possible solutions in discussion with the local community (summarised in the *Issues and Options report* - 22 March 2004); this stage concluded with the working group deciding which issues/options to investigate in more detail (outlined in the *Scope of Work for 'Stage 2'* – 22 April 2004).

Stage 2: Investigating the key issues and most promising options for the future (documented in *Gembrook – Melbourne's Best Kept Secret: a vibrant semi-rural growth area, or, a hidden gem?* – Cadman Agricultural Services, July 2004) and deciding on actions to realise a sustainable future for the rural land around Gembrook.

The drafting of this Action Plan in consultation with the community marks the third and final stage of the project under the current funding from the Department of Sustainability and Environment's Area Improvement Program. Once the plan is adopted by the working group, its implementation will be the responsibility of those organisations and individuals represented on the group and the community as a whole.

What has been achieved so far

The review has resulted in a number of significant outputs or outcomes:

- A shared community vision has been developed for the future of the rural land around Gembrook in 10 years (see summary below)
- The current circumstances and long-term intentions of local potato farmers has been clarified and documented
- A land capability statement for the rural land around Gembrook has been prepared as a valuable source of information for potential investors in the region
- A short list of agricultural and land use opportunities, well-suited to the land capabilities in the area, have been identified as potential replacements for potatoes
- A number of expressions of interest from potential investors and industry sources have been received for establishing new broad acre and niche agricultural options
- Possible sources of funding and incentives for landowners looking to change productive land use have been identified
- The project has highlighted the fact that existing landowners and potential purchasers of land in dieldrin-affected areas across the State would benefit greatly from a publication that provides simple, clear information on what alternative productive and lifestyle activities can be safely conducted on land affected by dieldrin (similar to the Government's *Arsenic and Health* brochure for people living in areas with mine tailings); Council has written to the EPA to propose that the EPA lead the preparation of such a brochure in collaboration with DPI and DHS for the benefit of many Victorian landowners
- The working group has concluded that the dieldrin levels in Gembrook soils appear to only affect grazing industries, and even these are possible with DPI-endorsed property management plans
- Three members of the local community attended an introductory workshop run by the Victorian Tourism Operators Association on setting up a tourism operation; these people are willing to share this material with other interested members of the Gembrook community
- The project has acted as a catalyst for Council to recommence investigation of a proposal to establish a retirement home or units in Gembrook
- Offers of support and assistance have been received from:
 - the Department of Primary Industries (DPI) Future Families Farms program, Bendigo

- DPI Box Hill, Ellenbank and Wangaratta for landowners wanting to learn more about managing grazing on dieldrin-affected land
- DPI Rutherglen which is looking at bioremediation of dieldrin in the soil, and
- Monash University, Faculty of Marketing and Tourism, at Berwick.

Gembrook in 10 years

Key outcomes identified as desirable for the longer-term by the Gembrook community (from feedback at two community workshops held on 9 December 2003 and 23 March 2004), the working group and research by Cadman Agribusiness Services are:

Productive land uses

Rich mix of smaller agricultural enterprises, hobby farms and lifestyle businesses and farms
Potatoes no longer dominant – more nurseries, tree farming, horses, berries, gourmet foods

Landscape / image

Maintain beautiful rural outlook and bush feel
More trees

Tourism / recreation

Linked to rural activities, local produce and landscape values
Variety of accommodation (farmstay, B&Bs, camping etc)
Area attractive to walkers and recreational horse riders

Community

More active and vibrant
More people living in the area (including retired farmers)
Well-serviced – retirement home, medical, public transport
Local employment, especially for younger people

At the second community workshop in March 2004 participants identified land uses they would hope or expect not to see including: broadacre farming, cattle grazing, tree farms, 'igloos' (plastic greenhouses), 'back to bush' and small lot subdivisions (less than 10 ha). (NB these expectations may or may not represent a widespread view in the community, but rather the opinions of individuals attending the workshop.)

Background to the actions for a sustainable future

Four key areas for action towards achieving the longer-term outcomes desired for Gembrook have emerged from the project:

1. Attracting new industries, companies and lifestyle investors to the area
2. Assisting potato growers to make decisions about their future
3. Enhancing environmental and landscape values
4. Building local support for and involvement in implementing the actions.

The following sections summarise the current situation, outlook and desired outcomes for each of these themes. The recommendations for each are tabled at the front of this plan.

1. Attracting new industries, companies and lifestyle investors

Current situation

The Gembrook potato industry was once thriving but, in the last decade, it has been beset by soil-related issues involving potato cyst nematode (PCN) and dieldrin (used in the past for pest control).

Not all properties are affected by PCN or dieldrin. Furthermore, the levels of dieldrin found in the area are safe for all land uses except grazing and even grazing can be safely managed under a DPI-endorsed farm management plan. However, dieldrin has a perception problem and there is a lack of clear advice for industries and individuals looking at buying dieldrin-affected land as to how to interpret soil testing information and the standards that apply to different land uses.

Eight properties in Gembrook have PCN on them but the whole area within a 20 km radius has a 'blanket' ban on the export of potatoes out of the State. PCN in the soil affects the growing of nightshade crops (eg tomatoes, eggplant) and any products that involve transporting soil (eg bulbs). The VFF Potato Growers' Council is trying to get a Victorian policy adopted nationally whereby individual properties affected by PCN can be certified as 'controlled' (with protocols affecting the processing and transport of potatoes). Under this system, the market for potatoes from PCN-free properties in the region would no longer be constrained.

Under the current Green Wedge provisions in the planning scheme, **subdivision of properties in the red soil areas of Gembrook to lots smaller than 15 ha is not an option**. This may be a barrier to attracting more intensive, smaller scale productive uses.

Outlook and desired outcomes

The preferred future for the Gembrook agricultural economy is one involving a diverse mix of small and large agricultural, tourism/recreation and environmental businesses. Lifestyle and hobby farms are likely to dominate the mix.

The most promising, larger industries suited to the area that could, at least partly, replace the current potatoes and grazing regime are:

Industry	Land area required (hectares)
Forestry (saw logs, wood pulp, and revegetation for 'carbon trading')	15 – 100+, and along creeks and windbreaks
Nursery (field)	>40
Horse industry	
- Commercial	>30
- Recreational	>8
Cattle *	>10
*(still a 'wildcard' opportunity depending on circumstances)	

Other smaller-scale, niche opportunities include:

- Berries – blueberries, raspberries (>4 ha)
- Native flowers (>6 ha)
- Vineyards and wineries (>2 ha).
- Green tea (4 – 8 ha)

Cadman Agribusiness Services advises that the optimum size for lifestyle farms and businesses would be 2 – 8 ha (where properties of this size already exist, as new subdivisions to this size are prohibited by the planning framework – see previous section).

The project's working group has also discussed an innovative, 'share farm' model whereby a farm could comprise a diverse mix of large and small scale production, and lifestyle lots all managed on one property. The potential benefits in this model for rural land in Gembrook, are that it could:

- offer an opportunity to focus on both agricultural and environmental sustainability
- allow for more 'lifestyle' properties without sacrificing agricultural productivity
- foster cooperation and collaboration between farmers and residents (eg sharing of equipment and effort, and helping lifestyle property owners understand the operational needs of a commercial farm)
- offer an 'exit strategy' for potato farmers who want to free up capital locked in their land, but also want to stay on the land.

Recommended actions

(see first pages of this plan)

2. Assisting potato growers to make decisions about their future

Current situation

Most of the present generation of growers intend retiring in the next 5-10 years. Only two out of twelve older growers intend leaving the industry. Another five say they would leave if they could subdivide but will otherwise hang on to their land (and continue some potato farming) into retirement, as they feel present prices are too low to sell. Many are reluctant to leave the area.

Survival of the new generation of growers remains precarious within the potato industry. They face the burden of having to support the older generation in retirement as the retirees' assets mean many are not eligible for the aged pension.

Outlook and desired outcomes

If some new industries are attracted to the area (see actions under theme 1 above), the rural land at Gembrook could quickly gain in value, which would provide an incentive for potato growers to sell. Alternative accommodation for older people in Gembrook could further encourage them to leave the land. Meanwhile, those who are eligible should be encouraged to take up the aged pension and Centrelink Farm Help program.

Recommended actions

(see first pages of this plan)

3. Enhancing environmental and landscape values

Current situation

Funding for a Landcare officer in the area was lost in the 1980s and, since that time, conservation and weed eradication efforts have been largely undertaken by a few committed local volunteers. There is a perception that many landowners are not particularly interested in environmental initiatives and yet the community does value, and wants to maintain and enhance, the beautiful rural outlook of the area.

Outlook and desired outcomes

If the community can demonstrate its desire to get more actively involved in maintaining and enhancing the area's natural assets, it is likely to gain more support for its efforts. A key

component of this support would be a full-time Landcare officer who could lead environmental and conservation initiatives (eg developing biolinks across agricultural land, best practice land management etc), access the many sources of funds available, and build links with other groups in the region.

Recommended actions

(see first pages of this plan)

4. Building local support for and involvement in implementing the actions

Current situation

Without some form of leadership at the individual and community level, it is unlikely that the actions recommended in this plan will be implemented.

The actions recommended in this plan recognise the need for external support through the appointment of agribusiness and Landcare facilitators, but these will not be enough without the commitment of individual local 'champions' who can lead the way with broader community support for their efforts.

A 'Community Strengthening Initiative' proposed for Gembrook was deferred as it coincided with the commencement of the Rural Review.

Outlook and desired outcomes

The community has a choice:

- to seize the initiative and actively work towards a sustainable future for Gembrook, based on redevelopment of the agricultural resource base and promotion of 'Melbourne's best kept secret', **or**
- to allow the area's agricultural and natural resources to decline and leave future development to chance.

Ideally, Gembrook can be a thriving, motivated community that knows what it wants for the future and feels empowered to achieve its goals.

Recommended actions

(see first pages of this plan)

NB The project working group noted the important links between tourism and agricultural activities in Gembrook and supported efforts by the Gembrook Tourism Committee to strengthen the area's tourism potential. There were, however, no specific actions arising from this project that went beyond what the Tourism Committee is already doing or considering.