

helping councils towards
sustainability

Northern Rivers Foodlinks

Council Name: Ballina, Byron, Clarence Valley, Kyogle, Lismore, Richmond Valley, Tweed Councils and Rous Water

Web Address: www.northernriversfoodlinks.com.au

Size: 20,732 square kilometres (combined)

Population: 277,917 (combined)



Abstract: Northern Rivers Food Links (NRFL) was a cooperative venture involving seven local government areas and the local water authority within the Northern Rivers region of NSW. The NRFL project addressed climate change impacts associated with food production, distribution and consumption by reducing the reliance on food sourced outside the region and by increasing more sustainable food production practices.

Background:

The project came about as a result of a truckload of avocados produced near Lismore going to market in Melbourne and then ending up on the shelves of a supermarket near Lismore. A group of individuals in conjunction with some of the Northern Rivers Councils got together to see how they could reduce the food miles for produce from the region.

While reduced food miles remained as a key aim, a number of others were identified during development of the business plan. The steering committee and the community identified issues with access to fresh affordable food, education improving the general sustainability of farming through programs such as soil health and pest control and also the health of consumers by bringing them closer to the production. The rationale involved building capacity of producers, distributors and consumers through a range of activities including training, farm trials, new facilities (such as community gardens), marketing and education. This was all aimed at increasing awareness, knowledge and skills to bring about both short term and long term changes to the way food is produced, distributed and consumed in the region.

Implementation:

The project was implemented by development of a business plan that was resourced with engagement of a project management team of 4 acting under the direction of the Steering committee. The target audience was the whole Northern Rivers Population with some components targeted at groups such as farmers, retailers, transporters, etc.

The steering committee and project management team was supported by a regional reference group of specialists from across the food sector including Department of Primary Industries (DPI) representative, farmers practicing innovative or best management practices, Catchment Management staff, and Landcare.

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This project has been assisted by the NSW Government through its Environmental Trust.

One local reference group was also established for each of the seven Council areas to inform decision making on priorities at the local level. Projects were selected based on the broad objectives of the business plan through an open EOI process with 7 Village showcase projects, one in each LGA, and various regional projects spread across the Northern Rivers. The regional reference group assessed the merit of each of the EOI's received and made recommendations to the Steering Committee for endorsement and funding.

The project had a budget just over \$2 million (majority of funding provided by the NSW Environmental Trust) with in-kind support contributing a further \$2.2million and was delivered over three years. There were 16,674 people directly involved with the project and 524 separate partnerships formed throughout the life of the project. The project relied on a significant research and a marketing program including TV and print media, local events, dedicated Foodlinks Website and frequent e-blasts to disseminate information and promote local food production and consumption. The project links to a number of the various Partners plans including the Department of Health. The broad objectives and outcomes contribute to councils' strategies on climate change, economic development and social plans.

Outcomes:

The NRFL project has enhanced community resilience to climate change and peak oil impacts by establishing networks to keep food affordable and accessible and tapping into local production capabilities. The project has increased the awareness of Northern Rivers residents on the wide-ranging benefits of how to grow food sustainably and to ask for and consume locally grown food. Across the seven focus areas that were used to drive project identification and delivery there were significant achievements:

1. *Village Showcase* projects enhanced local food chain systems and food security for the community at a grassroots level.
2. *Food Production and Distribution in Indigenous Communities* supported an Aboriginal community to begin food production, increase access to fresh healthy foods and reduce reliance on the need for food to travel distances to get to their community.
3. *Marketing and Education* introduced strategies to improve the knowledge and skills of consumers, producers and distributors in the region. There was a focus on changing behaviours not beliefs.
4. *Distribution* projects delivered innovative, co-ordinated initiatives with the intent of trialing models that could decentralise and localise the food supply and distribution system throughout the region.
5. *Local Government Resource Kit* project developed and implemented a food related policy, procedures and practices to deal with emerging issues associated with food production within the seven local government areas.
6. *Sustainable Agriculture* through on-farm initiatives added value to services and programs already being delivered in the region, whilst addressing opportunities for primary producers to make their farms more financially and environmentally sustainable.
7. *Discretionary funding* was allocated to support activities, which may have not received funding or provided existing Local Project Teams with additional funding to enhance their outcomes.

Some of the specific achievements included:

- 17 community gardens covering 8.5 hectares and 2 hectares of indigenous market garden,
- local government resource kit and 5 new policy templates,
- 23 farms participating in on farm composting,
- 40 community based skilling workshops,
- 85 retailers stocking and promoting local produce, one distributor increased use of local produce from 1.5t per month to 23.86 tonne per month,
- 224,175 hits on website over 17 months.

Challenges:

Personal and professional opinions and beliefs weighed heavily into the topic of food security and were reflected in expectations about what should and should not be included within the project e.g. local, organic, biodynamic, sustainable, ethic, vegetarian etc. Therefore a difficulty for this project was asking the early adopters to support the project even if it is (in their opinion) not moving the issue of food security forward fast and far enough. Conversely, the general consumer was hearing about the challenges of food security for the first time and needed to be given clear, simple actions to move the initiative forward. These difficulties drove the way the communication strategy was implemented. A significant amount of time was needed to focus on this aspect. In hindsight, additional resources should have been allocated to this part of the project during the planning phase.

From the number of organisations involved, through to the number of projects selected for on-ground activities, the scope and scale of this project was ambitious. Whilst all of the outcomes of the business plan were achieved, the main difficulty has been the quantity of administration required in contract management, financial management, and outcomes reporting. Project partners were placed under intense pressure to deliver on their contracts, and this caused tension at times between parties. Short timeframes reduce capacity for contingency planning. Outcomes were achieved, but required significant passion and dedication to deliver from all partners.

References:

<http://www.northernriversfoodlinks.com.au>

Local Government Resource Kit <http://www.northernriversfoodlinks.com.au/local-government-resource-kit/>

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