Preface

In times gone by, environmental issues on farmland were seen largely through the lens of agricultural production — we viewed the problems and their possible solutions in terms of how they affected agricultural outputs. Weeds, pests and erosion were challenges because they reduced the land’s productivity.

In recent decades, it has been recognised that farms can deliver much more than the sum of their agricultural products. In Australia, farming landscapes cover more than half our land mass, they provide refuge for many unique native animals and plants, and they are home to people.

In acknowledgement of the multiple values associated with farmland, Australian governments have been paying farmers to provide public goods and services for many years. These goods and services include habitat for wildlife, and healthier soil and water quality. Many countries around the world have been doing this too. These government programs have been commonly referred to as agri-environment schemes, as they are about improving environmental values in an agricultural space.

The Australian experience goes back a little over a quarter of a century, with well over $7 billion of public money having been invested. Unfortunately, Australia’s National Audit Office has found (repeatedly) that the programs have been unable to demonstrate enduring environmental outcomes. Over the same period, the nation has seen continuing declines in biodiversity, and land and water quality. To turn this around, can we learn from what has been done in the past (both here and overseas)?

Agri-environmental policy is an inherently complicated beast, involving a raft of different players, from farmers and conservationists to taxpayers and politicians. Each group brings with it a diverse set
of motivations and interests, including maximising profit, minimising biodiversity loss, and everything in between. A proper evaluation of agri-environment policies, therefore, requires a multi-disciplinary approach.

Towards the end of 2014, a group of people interested in biodiversity conservation and agriculture—ecologists, economists, social scientists, practitioners, and policymakers—met at a workshop in Canberra to share their knowledge and experience of agri-environment schemes in Australia. This book draws together the diverse experiences, ideas, and perspectives presented at that meeting.

Each chapter presents a different perspective on the challenge of designing and running effective agri-environment schemes. For anyone with an interest or a stake in agri-environment investment in Australia or overseas, we are confident there will be many lessons and insights for you in the following pages.

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Dean Ansell, Fiona Gibson, and David Salt

1 Dean, Fiona, and David jointly managed the workshop that led to this book and shared the jobs of editing and authoring the introductory and concluding chapters. Each claims an equal share of the book and names are ordered alphabetically.
Participants at the 2014 workshop on agri-environment schemes in Canberra.

From left to right: Back row — Angela Newey, Bill Woodruff, Geoff Kay, Graeme Doole, Stuart Whitten, Geoff Park, Sayed Iftekhar, Maksym Polyokov, Dean Ansell, and Emma Burns. Front row — David Salt, Rob Fraser, Graham Fifield, David Duncan, David Pannell, Fiona Gibson, and Phil Gibbons.

Source: Photo by David Salt.
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