

**Technical report 181**  
**A brief guide to effective community  
engagement in the Australian  
plantation sector**

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Public report

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## Introduction

This brief guide provides information for plantation managers and field staff in regards to current ‘best practice’ community engagement (CE) in the plantation sector. Preliminary opportunities for improving community engagement practices are identified to provide a starting point for CE improvement both within individual companies and across the forest industry as a whole. This guide is a working summary of a larger CE report currently in development, which will be published by the CRC for Forestry’s ‘Communities’ project<sup>1</sup>.

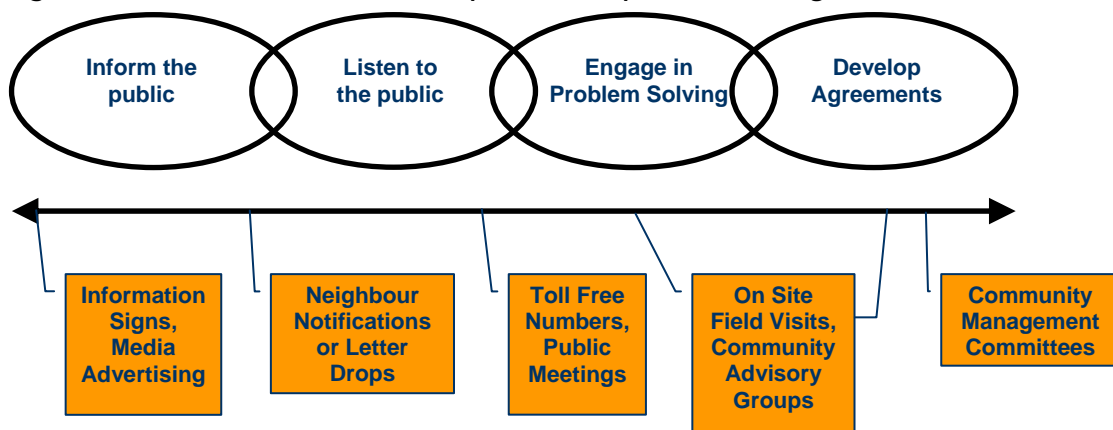
This guide discusses:

- What is CE and why do it – is CE worth doing?
- Expectations – what expectations should you have of CE?
- Who to involve – priorities and strategies for selecting CE participants
- What works and what doesn’t – the “dos” and “don’ts” of undertaking CE
- Key methods and tools – what approaches are currently used by members of the plantation industry
- What to do when it goes wrong – apologies, commitment and keeping house
- Recommendations – how can community engagement be improved?

### Community engagement: a contemporary weasel word?

Like ‘community consultation’ and ‘public participation’, ‘community engagement’ is a popular term in modern resource management, but is often vaguely defined. CE is usually described as including a range of activities along a continuum that ranges from ‘informing’ to ‘joint action’, as indicated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Continuum of Public Participation (adapted from Creighton 2005)*



The term ‘community engagement’ is used by the forest industry and others to describe a wide range of activities in which stakeholders exchange information and/or negotiate mutually acceptable actions. These actions range from providing simple information signs on plantation boundaries to establishing multi-stakeholder dialogues that lead to joint action on issues such as game management or road funding.

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the Communities project,

see <http://www.crcforestry.com.au/research/programme-four/communities/>

## Why do community engagement?

Many guides to community engagement assume it is always a good thing to do. It is always worth questioning this assumption, and asking yourself whether CE is the right thing to do for your circumstances. Why and how would it be helpful to the people who participate (both within and outside the forest industry)? Do you have enough resources and skills to ensure CE is undertaken well?

CE, when done properly, can be beneficial to both the community and forestry companies. CE can help to improve relationships with key community representatives, generate greater understanding and trust from the general public, and develop open and transparent lines of communication. These positive outcomes all work together to provide valuable opportunities for improved operational efficiencies and company profiles. Although CE takes time and money, the social and operational benefits promoted by good CE are likely to outweigh the initial costs.

Many people – including many in the forest industry and many members of the general public the industry wishes to engage with – are understandably cynical about CE and question whether it is worth doing. This cynicism is partly a result of ongoing promotion of community engagement as a ‘politically correct’ thing to do, which can lead to CE being implemented as a ‘spin’ or ‘PR’ exercise. It also results from the ‘participation fatigue’ caused when people are constantly barraged with requests to be ‘consulted’ or ‘engaged’ in many social and political processes, or when they feel that a CE process has not led to any productive outcomes.

Good CE goes beyond spin or PR, and involves more than the provision of glossy information brochures and media advertisements, although these may be part of effective CE. Good CE shouldn’t involve making more and more demands on the limited time of plantation managers and other members of the community wanting to engage about plantation issues.

Effective CE provides the plantation industry and others with an interest in plantation forestry with an opportunity to express their different views, share knowledge, come to agreement on key issues and actions and build successful relationships. It can result in improved levels of trust between participants, improved trust in the processes through which plantation management decisions are made, and a greater acceptance of forest industry activities. It is worth doing, but only if adequate commitment is made to doing it well.

CE is often thought of as involving four broad ‘levels’ or ‘types’ of engagement:

- **Informing** is generally one-way communication
- **Consulting** is two-way communication with decision making resting with plantation manager
- **Involving** is creating shared understandings and ways of moving forward which are then undertaken by one partner
- **Partnerships** involve developing shared action plans

It is important to emphasise that the outcomes of effective CE are about improving trust, but not necessarily about stopping disagreement. Disagreement and different points of view will always exist about plantations. Disagreements can provide a positive stimulus which helps result in improved practices; equally, it can be a negative and destructive force which results in no productive outcomes. Effective CE will help to utilise disagreement in a positive way by helping those involved better understand each other’s

points of view and be challenged to change their perceptions about the management of plantations and plantation-related issues.

### When should community engagement be done?

Community engagement should be implemented during all stages of plantation management, including planning, establishment, maintenance and eventual harvesting. Continual communications with the impacted and interested community is essential to discuss the perceived impacts of each forest management stage, maintain positive working relationships with neighbours and provide opportunities for shared decision making. Table 1 describes some of the operations where CE may be appropriate.

**Table 1.** Example situations where CE may be implemented

Situation	Why	Benefits	Weaknesses
Land acquisition	Form relationship with neighbours.	Builds trust and open channels of communication. Provides access to local knowledge.	Provides early opportunity for intervention. Time consuming if direct contact made.
Prior to operational plan being completed	Increase acceptance of plan by inviting and accepting others input. Raises concerns early thus provides time and opportunity to overcome issues.	Improves efficiency of operations. Further builds relationships and trust. Improves quality of decision making.	Time consuming May require higher cost operational 'concessions' to be made to ensure mutual acceptance of plan.
Prior to operations commencing	Advise directly impacted residents of operations and associated risks (i.e. site preparation, chemical applications, game control, harvesting).	Improves efficiency of operations. Concerns regarding chemical types, noise or dust pollution, truck cart routes etc raised early and thus more easily overcome.	Provides early opportunity for intervention. Time consuming if direct contact made. May require higher cost operational 'concessions' to be made to ensure mutual acceptance of plans.
Fire situations	Inform public of risks and actions being undertaken. Develop collaborative fire plans.	Improves safety. Improves efficiency of operations. Reduces impacts.	Can inflame situations. Difficult to reach appropriate people in fire situations.

## Great expectations: getting them clear at the start

You've decided community engagement is the way to go, and you're really enthusiastic about getting into it. What can you realistically expect to achieve? What is expected of you from the communities you will be trying to engage? How do you manage these expectations?

One of the major challenges of community engagement is overly high expectations from both the participating public and the plantation managers themselves. Plantation managers may hope that good CE will stop all disagreement and debate about plantations in their local area. Community members may hope that they can have a high level of influence on decision making regarding plantation operations. Both these expectations are often unrealistic.

At the start of any process, it's important to discuss and clarify expectations on all sides:

- Plantation managers: not everyone will respond positively to CE. A realistic expectation of CE is to achieve better understanding of what plantation managers do and why they do it, and more positive dialogue regarding plantation management activities. There will always be some disagreement about the pros and cons of plantations; good community engagement will help turn unproductive conflict into more productive dialogue but won't – and shouldn't – stop disagreement.
- Other community members with an interest in plantations: it is important to ensure members of the community understand the limitations of what can be achieved from a CE process, as they may have high expectations that cannot be met by the plantation industry. For example, the commercial and regulatory realities of growing a plantation limit the changes that can be made to field practices. A clear understanding of this at the outset will reduce potential for disillusionment with the process, and ensure the process is more effective in achieving practical outcomes for everybody involved.

## The 'community': do I really have to involve them?

Community engagement generally involves talking to people you might otherwise not have direct contact with – in fact, that's often the main reason for doing it. A beginning step for many CE processes is attempting to define the 'community' that ideally should be 'engaged'.

The term 'community' can in its broadest sense mean anyone and everyone within and outside the plantation industry. The 'community' is often more specifically defined as people who are parts of:

- a community of interest (anyone interested in or affected by a particular issue but not necessarily located in the same geographic region), and/or
- a community of place (all people who live or work or undertake activities in a particular location).

In either case, the community of interest or place will need to be identified and consideration given to the diversity of individuals and groups that exist within any given interest or place.

The people and groups who should be involved in CE should be considered and identified both before a process is started and regularly during the process, as it is common for new and different participants to be identified as a CE process develops.

There is a lot of debate about who should be involved in CE. This debate often revolves around whether you should involve people who have a ‘stake’ in the issues being discussed, or people who have an ‘interest’ but are not necessarily directly affected by the issues.

This is a difficult issue as while it is politically correct to argue that CE should involve anyone who wants to be involved, in practice it is easy for CE processes to be derailed unless care is taken in thinking about who is involved and why. Currently, most plantation industry CE involves people directly affected by plantation operations, and methods are often designed to facilitate the involvement of these people. For example, this often occurs through letter notifications and face to face meetings with individuals known to be located near plantations and hence potentially affected by plantation management activities.

If anyone with an interest is to be involved, the process needs to be designed to accommodate this and may require more resources and different techniques which enable their involvement (for example, public meetings, and media advertisements on how to get involved).

So how do you figure out who to involve? While it will differ in any situation, if you are the person or group developing a CE process, some good principles to follow include:

- **Develop clear criteria** for involvement and communicate these well. These criteria should be flexible enough to allow for the identification of new groups and people who may not be initially identified, but also clear on the purpose of the process and who it is aimed at. Your criteria may be based on involving people potentially affected (e.g. neighbours, those living along a haulage route), a geographic area (eg a local government area experiencing plantation expansion), or anyone with an interest (various government bodies, environmental stewardship groups, recreationists).
- **Identify potential participants** and how you can contact them and facilitate their involvement:
  - **Analyse** who would fall within your criteria – what groups? What individuals? Identify how each of these groups can be contacted, invited to participate directly, and the best times and spaces in which to communicate and interact with them.
  - Provide people with **opportunity** to become involved in the process. For example, you might letter-drop local residents; advertise the process in the media or via presentations at relevant community group meetings.
  - Identify social and business **networks** you can tap into – often it is better to utilise an existing process in which key people are already involved, rather than reinvent the wheel and create an entirely new CE process.
  - Continue to identify people and invite **new involvement** over time – new people are always shifting into rural regions and it is essential to provide opportunities for inclusion.
- **Be realistic.** Too often good CE is undone by trying to achieve too much with too many people. Acknowledge your limited time, resources and skills and be upfront about how such limitations affect the process from the outset. Participants can work more effectively with you if they are informed of the practical limitations of available resources and time from the outset.

## What works and what doesn't – some dos and don'ts

There are some practical 'rules of engagement' that are important to consider when conducting any form of CE, no matter how extensive or what particular method of engagement is to be used:

### Do:

- **Initiate contact** – make contact early rather than waiting for something to go wrong. It is better to be proactive and have the ability to influence attitudes than being on the back foot and having to deal with attitudes that have been created. For example, notify your neighbours before undertaking an activity, get to know your local government planners and councillors and ask them what they want/need to know about you, your operations and strategic planning.
- **Listen** – while it can be tempting to dismiss concerns raised by community members as being misinformed, dismissing views will mean you never understand why and how these concerns have arisen, or whether they are concerns which need active response. Listening will provide social insights into common concerns and thus help improve your ability to counter views you don't personally agree with.
- **Communicate honestly and openly** – be clear about what you can and can't do; about what you're doing and why; don't promise actions you can't carry out or which are beyond your authority. People generally respect honesty and openness even when they don't like what they are hearing.
- **Show respect** – it can be hard to show respect to the different views you have to engage with during CE processes, especially those views that attack your personal values and beliefs. Respect is shown not just through simply taking the time to have a meeting, but through the body and spoken language used at the meeting(s), and the resulting actions you take. Using facilitation techniques such as reflecting back to other participants your interpretation of the conversation helps show that you understand (or don't understand) their key points and concerns; ensures you check your understanding of the issues; and shows personal respect for other's views.
- **Act** – recognise that sometimes community engagement will result in changes to plantation management. Currently it is common for layout of a plantation to be modified in some ways, for game management to be jointly planned with neighbours, or for alterations to some chemical applications to be made based on the outcomes of discussions with neighbouring and nearby landholders. CE is sometimes misrepresented as being about 'educating' other people about forest management. While providing information and evidence is a key part of CE, CE should also provide opportunity for the sharing of concerns and mutual development of agreed actions. Outcomes of such processes may require changes to forest management or operational plans, company policies and even personal beliefs.
- **Participate** – the plantation industry will not always be the stakeholder initiating a CE process which deals with plantation related issues. If others want to engage you in their CE process, participate.
- **Document** – keep records of contacts made, what you did, what you promised to do in the future. Documentation of processes is an essential part of good CE. Well kept records are necessary to provide evidence of decisions made or discussions held, and to develop a database of tools and techniques used, their outcomes and ideas for improvement. This helps to provide necessary information for implementing agreed actions, certification auditing, legal action (although hopefully not!), ongoing policy development, staff training or CE evaluation. In addition, it helps to ensure that successful CE is not dependent on a single staff member.

## Don't:

- **Wait too long** – fast response to any concerns is essential, as otherwise concerns may escalate into conflict. Ideally, initiate contact before concerns come up, although this isn't always possible given the dispersed characteristics of forestry operations, and significant media influence in some contexts.
- **Dismiss the views of others** – good CE requires understanding that different points of view are legitimate, and shouldn't be dismissed. Accepting views as legitimate doesn't mean you agree with them, but that you treat all views with respect and give them due consideration during the decision-making process.
- **Spin** – one of the fastest ways to disillusionment is to promise CE and then fail to hear other points of view and act on them. Only delivering glossy brochures about how good the forest industry is can lead to perceptions of tokenism and further mistrust of the industry, although such information may be useful when used in conjunction with other more interactive CE methods.
- **Limit the scope** – don't limit CE by making it the responsibility of a single individual, encouraging use of only one or two techniques, or selecting the same participants again and again. Good CE requires a variety of techniques to be used to provide opportunities for people to become involved at a time that suits them, or in a format that they are comfortable with. A broad range of community views is pivotal for good CE and will support a greater acceptance of the CE process and its outcomes.
- **Reinvent the wheel** - don't implement a new CE process if existing processes could be used to deal with the same issues. Find out about the forums by which people may already be interacting (e.g. Landcare, local NRM committees, or a local government sponsored committee) and utilise these where possible rather than adding to people's time commitments by asking them to participate in a new and different group.

## Key methods and tools – approaches currently used by the plantation industry

The forest industry currently uses a range of CE techniques designed to apply to a range of different situations, regulatory requirements and resource availability. These techniques, the situations they are typically used in, and their general strengths and weaknesses are briefly described in Table 2. This list is by no means exhaustive. A wide range of other tools and techniques are used in CE in other contexts, but are currently not typically used in Australian plantation management.

The CE technique chosen for any situation should suit the level of engagement required to meet your individual CE goal. In some cases the need may be to better inform members of a town or region about plantation management activities such as planned establishment of a new plantation, management activities, or use of roads when harvesting. In others, the need may be to develop a jointly agreed plan for dealing with game management issues which are the responsibility of a range of individuals and groups, of which the plantation industry is one. Different techniques will be needed to implement effective CE in these two examples.

**Table 2.** Community engagement methods used in Australian plantation management

<b>CE method</b>	<b>When is it typically used?</b>	<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>	<b>Level of engagement</b>
<p><b>Letter notifications</b> A letter is sent to specific people notifying of planned activities, often inviting them to discuss any concerns by contacting the plantation manager</p>	<p>Prior to operations commencing; when small and identifiable number of people potentially impacted/ interested e.g. neighbouring landholders</p>	<p>Large number people contacted; informative; only people with concerns reply</p>	<p>Privacy rules make it hard to contact all relevant people; only reaches those people with adequate literacy levels; one way communication</p>	<p>Informing, inviting, interaction</p>
<p><b>Face to face meetings</b> Used in a range of situations, involves discussions with individuals rather than with a group. Can be used to inform, consult or to develop shared agreement on actions</p>	<p>Prior to operations commencing, on request; when an issue has been raised during or after operations</p>	<p>Builds relationships; enables understanding of each person's issues and addressing them individually; detailed two-way information sharing; breaks down barriers in comfortable environment; improves management through early identification and resolution of conflict</p>	<p>Time consuming; limited number people contacted</p>	<p>Informing, consulting, involving</p>
<p><b>Information signs</b> Signs placed at visible location informing about plantation site, management activity. May include contact details for those with concerns to contact</p>	<p>During operations, ongoing (e.g. signs on plantation properties erected for life of plantation)</p>	<p>Accessed by large number of people in context; provide basic information and contact details</p>	<p>No direct interaction; can be overlooked in the landscape; open for vandalism</p>	<p>Informing</p>
<p><b>Media advertisements</b> Advertisements may provide information about activities; or notify about and invite participation in CE processes</p>	<p>Prior to operations commencing; prior to and during large scale CE processes; ongoing PR</p>	<p>Information content is controlled; large number of people reached; FAQ's can be answered</p>	<p>Can be seen as 'spin'; little opportunity for two-way interactions</p>	<p>Public relations, informing, inviting further interaction</p>
<p><b>Philanthropy – sponsorships</b> Sponsoring community groups and activities</p>	<p>When establishing presence in a new area; ongoing community building</p>	<p>Raises awareness of company in community; can provide opportunities for interaction</p>	<p>Can be seen as a buy-out</p>	<p>Public relations, informing</p>

<p><b>Advisory committees</b> A committee of stakeholders who discuss and provide advice and recommendations to plantation manager or regulator. Plantation manager/regulator then typically makes final decisions on actions</p>	<p>Ongoing exploration of concerns and views of community</p>	<p>Opportunity to test and modify planned decisions before implementing; improved acceptance of decisions; increased understanding of other viewpoints; detailed discussion and analysis of issues; ongoing nature improves relationships</p>	<p>Time and labour intensive; care is needed in deciding who and how to involve on the committee especially when there is tension between groups; relies on management accepting advice; care needed in setting expectations about influence on decision making</p>	<p>Consulting, involving, partnerships</p>
<p><b>Public meetings</b> Meetings to which any interested member of the public is invited (often notified through media, signs in local shops, sending letters). Can be structured in many ways to inform or consult</p>	<p>When need to provide information to large number people; when wish to invite comment in an open meeting setting</p>	<p>Information shared with large number people; raises awareness of activities; provides initial opportunity to interact; highly accepted method by public</p>	<p>Need to carefully consider location and time to ensure those who wish to can attend; can ne derailed by individuals/ groups; difficult to manage effectively; often does not allow for meaningful consultation or debate; requires skilled &amp; well informed facilitation</p>	<p>Informing, consulting, inviting further interaction</p>
<p><b>Field visits</b> Visits to plantations or processing facilities, usually taking a group rather than individuals</p>	<p>When people want to learn more about how plantation management and/or processing operates</p>	<p>Increases awareness of issues; neutral discussion environment; provides networking opportunities; two way communication</p>	<p>Limited number participants; can be costly; requires knowledgeable staff with good communication skills</p>	<p>Informing, consulting</p>
<p><b>Community management committees</b> A committee which discusses and proposes actions on issues of community interest; may be responsible for making final decisions (e.g. local fire management committees)</p>	<p>When joint action needs to be planned between different groups</p>	<p>Develops decisions acceptable to all; builds trust and relationships; helps develop new solutions to shared problems</p>	<p>Can be resource and time intensive (depending on how often group meets and actions needed); critical to ensure good representation</p>	<p>Consulting, involving, partnerships</p>

## **What to do when it all goes wrong – apologies, commitment and keeping house**

CE is often about responding to existing conflict and difficult situations. This means that things can go wrong and CE practitioners should be prepared for this. Sometimes poor results can be attributed to the CE practitioner through poor planning, facilitation or commitment to the process and its goals (this includes both personal or company commitment and resourcing). On other occasions poor results may be due to irreconcilable differences in goals and perceived outcomes, lack of commitment from participants or lack of adequate resources. For example, a process might go wrong if it is timed when many other local activities are going on, meetings are not well planned, or one member of the group is not interested in hearing other's views.

When things go wrong, don't simply walk away and ignore it. If 'failure' is due to the actions (or lack of actions) from your organisation or you as an individual, you need apologise to the people involved and admit to your mistakes. If the poor result is due to behaviour of others involved, identify what is happening and why and try to find ways to improve future CE processes – in some cases this may be through modifying the process to better enable some people to take part; in others it may involve everyone agreeing that one participant needs to leave if they are unwilling to genuinely participate in the process.

Ongoing commitment to CE does not only mean continuing to conduct CE with the community. Commitment also requires continual analysis and reflection on previously conducted processes, to ensure that mistakes are not repeated and lessons learnt are shared with peers.

### **Opportunities for improvement**

The following are some preliminary opportunities that have been identified to help improve CE in the Australian plantation industry. These opportunities offer basic starting points from which individual companies can work to improve CE implementation and policies.

Further research and discussion with the forest industry is required to further develop these opportunities:

- Evaluate the effectiveness of a wide range of CE methods for use in the Australian plantation industry. This will provide the basis for recommending a flexible range of approaches, rather than relying of the relatively limited number of approaches currently in use.
- Improve documentation of the large amount of ad hoc CE that is occurring. Documenting current approaches and practices better will assist in identifying the most effective approaches and building a shared body of knowledge.
- Increase capacity building in CE and conflict management skills, particularly for operational staff. Many staff currently undertaking CE have little or no training. Workshops held in Victoria in 2007 by DPI Victoria and the CRC for Forestry enabled members of the industry to share and learn from each other's experiences, and provided a useful forum for building capacity and skills.

- Increase staff numbers in regional areas to ensure adequate resourcing of CE. CE is time consuming, and the pressures of operational tasks can limit the extent of effective CE undertaken, particularly the use of direct personal contact and documentation of CE activities.
- Increase collaboration and communication between members of the plantation industry when undertaking CE. Many community concerns about plantations apply to the sector as a whole, not to a single company – collaboration on CE processes to address these concerns is likely to be more effective than individual companies undertaking CE in isolation of each other.
- Utilise long-term Advisory Groups or Management Committee arrangements in which a group of people interact about plantation issues over an extended period and are able to build their capacity to discuss and act on these issues.

### **Additional resources**

The following resources may be useful:

1. Forestry Commission (2004) 'Involving people in forestry: a toolbox for public involvement in forest and woodland planning.' Forestry Commission, Edinburgh.  
<http://www.forestry.gov.uk/toolbox>
2. Creighton JL (2005) 'The Public Participation Handbook: Making Better Decisions Through Citizen Involvement.' (Jossey-Bass, San Francisco)
3. International Association of Public Participation website –  
<http://www.iap2.org/>
4. Queensland Government 'Get Involved' resources –  
[http://www.getinvolved.qld.gov.au/share\\_your\\_knowledge/resources/guides\\_publications.html](http://www.getinvolved.qld.gov.au/share_your_knowledge/resources/guides_publications.html)
5. DSE Effective Engagement Kit -  
<http://www.dpi.vic.gov.au/dse/wcmn203.nsf/Home+Page/8A461F99E54B17EBCA2570340016F3A9?open>

## Contact details for the CRC for Forestry Communities project

Current research into Community Engagement in Australian forest management is being funded by the CRC for Forestry, and conducted by the Tasmanian Institute for Agricultural Research (TIAR) at the University of Tasmania, Hobart. Contact details for researchers involved in the project can be found at:

<http://www.crcforestry.com.au/research/programme-four/communities>

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