

# Rural health scheme a hit

## Positive south-west feedback

**REGION**  
By **ALEXANDRA WEAVER**

AN audit has found plenty of positives in a south-west initiative aiming to improve the health of those on the land, while also warning that falling participation rates must be tackled.

The Sustainable Farm Families (SFF) program was launched through the Western District Health Service (WDHS) in 2003 and secured \$5.08 million in funding from the Department of Primary Industries (DPI) during 2007 and 2008.

It is designed to boost the well-being of participants and involves a series of annual workshops over three years, giving information and advice about rural health issues.

Those attending are also given free yearly health checks and the chance to take part in focus groups and action planning.

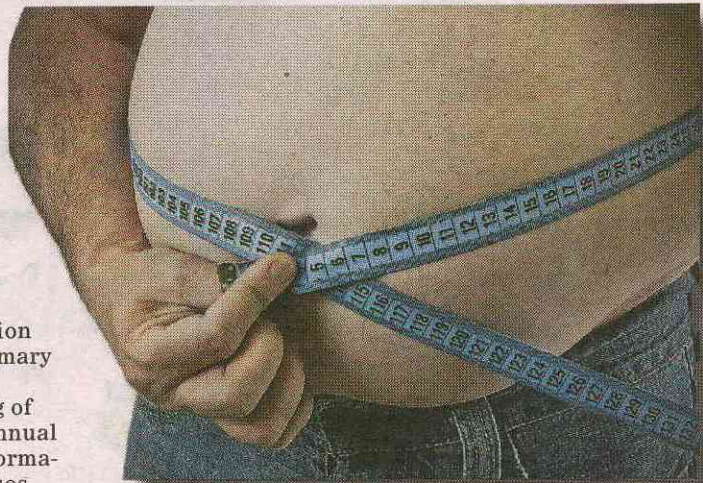
Victorian Auditor-General Des Pearson tabled a 30-page report on the program in Parliament this week after examining whether it had improved the health of farming families.

He found that SFF had been effective, highlighting interviews in which 99 per cent of farmers agreed the program had increased their knowledge of relevant health issues.

Ninety-three per cent of interviewed participants felt the program had given them skills to make changes to their lifestyle, while the same percentage reported increased confidence to manage their own health and well-being.

WDHS chief executive Jim Fletcher said the SFF program had been implemented across Australia, with 2318 participants since it began.

"It's a very positive report, and it's really a ringing endorsement of the program and the



benefits that are flowing on to improving the health, well-being and safety of farming families," he said.

"One of the things the (auditor-general's) report identifies is that the participants who received the highest improvement in terms of health are those at greatest risk."

Mr Pearson made four recommendations, among them that the DPI should examine reasons for farmers leaving the yearly workshops.

He found that while retention rates were above expectation — 79 per cent from first to second year in the latest series of programs — these had a declining number of participants.

In his written response to the audit, DPI secretary Richard Bolt said informal evaluations showed clashes with important dates, farmers leaving the industry and health problems were among reasons for reduced numbers.