**Background**

Bush Returns is a landscape restoration program targeting private land and is designed to increase landscape-level native vegetation, especially tree cover, in the Goulburn Broken Catchment. The initiative, run by the Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority operates by landholders bidding in a blind auction for contracts that yield the landholder annual payment in return for agreed and specified management on an agreed site over five or ten years duration.

Investment by the GBCMA in specified landholder management rests on the premise that increases in native vegetation extent and condition will result, primarily in landscape-level tree cover. Thus, it is imperative to know whether tree regeneration is happening and what is driving differences in tree regeneration rates.

**Study sites**

In 2005 there were four properties participating in the Bush Returns incentive scheme. Fifteen properties were added in 2006, while the scheme was discontinued at one property. Four properties were added in 2007 for a total of 22 properties participating in the scheme. All properties are located within the Goulburn Broken Catchment and cover an area from Yea in the south, Rushworth in the west, and Nathalia in the north.

The properties span a natural rainfall gradient in three zones: Alexandra (704 mm mean annual precipitation), Euroa (648 mm) and Dookie (550 mm) (BOM 2008). The most common Ecological Vegetation Classes found at the sites are Grassy Dry Forest, Box Ironbark Forest, Grassy Woodland, Plains Grassy Woodland and Valley Grassy Forest.

The condition of the sites ranged from those with a native-dominated understorey, where light grazing had recently ceased, or had continued infrequently, to those that were more heavily grazed and where past management practices may have included cultivation, fertiliser application and sowing of exotic perennial species. Typically, the sites are relatively open and include scattered or small patches of eucalypts with a high cover ratio of native grasses to weeds. Measurements of site characteristics, including: understorey species composition, cover and height, and soil moisture, were recorded at each experimental site.