

# Master TreeGrower South-East #2

## Wrap-up Report

*Bega, NSW | October 2025 – March 2026*



**SENSW-2025-022** Bega Master TreeGrower 2025–2026

Report date: April 2026

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## Summary

The Master TreeGrower (MTG) course, delivered by Rowan Reid of the Australian Agroforestry Foundation, is an 8-day, field-based course designed for landholders who want to begin forestry projects on their land but are unsure where to start. The course covers silviculture, timber markets, native forest management, plantation forestry, and risk management through a combination of classroom sessions and site visits to working properties and businesses.

**27 participants**, managing approximately **2,400 hectares** of land, completed the 2025–2026 course, delivered over four two-day teaching blocks between October 2025 and March 2026. Participants were drawn from across the South East region of NSW, with one participant travelling from as far as Newcastle.

Sessions were presented by a range of educators and industry practitioners:

| Presenter          | Organisation / Role   |
|--------------------|---|
| Rowan Reid         | Director, Australian Agroforestry Foundation                                  |
| Annabel Kater      | Director, Australian Agroforestry Foundation / Australian Sustainable Timbers |
| Mike Robinson-Koss | Director, Australian Agroforestry Foundation                                  |
| Rob de Fégely      | Manager, South East NSW Regional Forestry Hub                                 |
| Dennis Pollack     | Private Native Forests, Local Land Services                                   |
| Damien Bunting     | South Coast Timber, Eden  |
| Ben Buggy          | Course Coordinator, South East Agroforestry Network                           |



# Outcomes

The 2025–2026 MTG course achieved three primary outcomes of relevance to the Regional Forestry Hub’s objectives and the broader Australian Government investment in private forestry development.

## **Empowering private landholders to diversify into forestry**

The course demonstrated that forestry can be a valuable component of diversified land management, asset building, and income generation. Participants gained practical understanding of forestry models — from plantation establishment through to native forest management — and the silvicultural techniques used in industry and how they apply at the farm scale.

Following the course, seven participants reported that they had expanded their range of interest to include timber production or income generation — a significant shift given that many participants initially identified biodiversity, conservation, and aesthetics as their primary motivations. This pattern, consistent with findings across more than 135 MTG courses delivered nationally, suggests the course successfully opens pathways for landholders to integrate production values alongside their existing environmental goals.

## **Building connections to the forestry industry**

Participants visited South Coast Timber’s hardwood mill in Eden during an active milling operation, providing a direct understanding of how private landholders can participate in the timber supply chain. Presentations from Dennis Pollack (LLS Private Native Forests) and Damien Bunting (South Coast Timber) connected participants to the regulatory and commercial frameworks that underpin private forestry in the region.

Field trips to properties in the Shoalhaven, Kangaroo Valley, and Bega Valley exposed participants to a range of forest types, management approaches, and landscape contexts — from well-established plantation systems through to native forest silviculture and agroforestry integration.

## **Strengthening the regional grower network**

A standout outcome of this course has been the strengthening of the South East Agroforestry Network (SEAN). Participant willingness to be involved with landholder groups scored 9.9 out of 10 — the highest-rated item in the evaluation. This reflects both the quality of the group assembled and the growing momentum behind SEAN as a vehicle for ongoing peer support, knowledge sharing, and collective action in the region.

SEAN is now running a pilot peer support programme in 2026, in which graduates from the MTG course work together on practical forestry activities on each other’s properties — a direct outcome of the networks and relationships built during this course.



### Block 3: January 2026 — Shoalhaven and Kangaroo Valley Field Trips

This block took the course on the road with an extended programme of site visits to the north of the region. Participants visited the properties of **Doug Schutz** and **Ron McKinnon** in Tomerong, and travelled to **Andrew Fitzsimons'** property at Wattamolla in the Kangaroo Valley. These visits provided exposure to different landscape contexts, management histories, and approaches to integrating trees into farming systems.



### Block 4: March 2026 — Economics, Aesthetics, and Graduation

**Rowan Reid** returned for the final block with sessions on the economics of farm forestry, emphasising asset creation and the basis for gradual, ongoing investment. **Mike Robinson-Koss**, who has managed a native nursery in the Otway Ranges for over 30 years, spoke about species diversity in plantings and demonstrated practical techniques.

The final day included a session on aesthetics and innovation in farm forestry, the presentation of Master TreeGrower gate signs to graduates, and Rowan's encouragement for the group to support the South East Agroforestry Network and each other going forward.



## Participant Evaluation

Twenty of the 27 graduates completed the anonymous written evaluation survey on the final day. The survey instrument, designed by Dr Tim O'Mera (University of Melbourne) in the late 1990s, has been used consistently across more than 135 MTG courses nationally, providing a robust basis for comparison.

### Skills and knowledge

Participants reported very high levels of satisfaction with the skills and knowledge gained. On a scale of 1–5, the following average scores were recorded:

| Statement  | Score   |
|--|---------|
| I have learnt some new and useful skills in tree and forest establishment and management           | 4.7 / 5 |
| I now have greater confidence to plan and implement tree projects aimed at addressing my interests | 4.7 / 5 |
| I now have greater understanding of the science of trees and their management                      | 4.6 / 5 |
| I now have a greater awareness of the information and support available to tree growers            | 4.2 / 5 |
| I feel more engaged with other tree growers  | 4.5 / 5 |

These scores are consistent with outcomes across the national MTG programme and are considered very high for any educational programme (scores above 4.5 are generally regarded as excellent).

### Network and advocacy

On a scale of 1–10, participants scored the following:

| Statement   | Score    |
|---|----------|
| How likely are you to recommend the MTG program to others?  | 9.7 / 10 |
| How willing would you be to share your tree growing and management experiences with other landholders?      | 9.5 / 10 |
| How keen are you to be involved with landholder groups or organisations related with tree growing on farms? | 9.9 / 10 |

The score for willingness to engage with landholder groups (9.9) is particularly significant in the context of the South East Forestry Hub's investment in building regional capacity.

### Shift in interests

The course consistently broadens participant interest in timber production. Seven participants (35% of respondents) reported that they had increased their range of interest to include timber production or income generation by the end of the course. This is an indicator for the Commonwealth's investment in private forestry, as it demonstrates the programme's capacity to shift landholder attitudes from passive land stewardship toward active, productive forest management — without diminishing their conservation or aesthetic values.

## Follow-on Activities

The 2025–2026 Master TreeGrower course has generated tangible follow-on activity that extends the value of the Commonwealth’s investment beyond the course itself.

### South East Agroforestry Network (SEAN)

SEAN, a special interest group established following the original 2022 MTG course, has been significantly strengthened by this second cohort. The network now represents a growing community of private landholders across the South East region with shared interests in farm forestry, native forest management, and sustainable timber production. The 2026 course graduates have brought new energy, new properties, and new perspectives into the network.

### Peer support pilot programme

In 2026, SEAN is piloting a neighbourhood peer support programme in which MTG graduates work together on practical forestry activities on each other’s properties. This programme — a direct outcome of the relationships built during the MTG course — represents a shift from classroom-based learning to hands-on, collaborative practice among landholders.

### Tree Jam 2026

SEAN is delivering Tree Jam 2026 in April — a demonstration day focused on mobile milling, timber utilisation, and agroforestry practices. This event, hosted at a member’s property in Brogo and supported by LLS, builds on the network’s annual programme of events and provides a practical showcase for the skills and knowledge developed through the MTG course.

### Ongoing industry connections

Several participants have maintained contact with presenters from the course and are pursuing Private Native Forestry Plans with LLS. The connections established with South Coast Timber, the Australian Agroforestry Foundation, and the South East Forestry Hub continue to provide pathways for landholders seeking to move from learning into action.

The 2025–2026 course maintained the high standards set by the 2022 pilot, with comparable or improved scores across all evaluation metrics. The smaller participant number (27 vs 35) reflects a deliberate emphasis on quality engagement and practical follow-through, and the higher average landholding per participant (89 hectares vs 57 hectares) suggests the course is reaching landholders with significant capacity to implement forestry projects.

## Conclusion

The Master TreeGrower programme continues to demonstrate its value as a mechanism for building private forestry capacity in regional Australia. The 2025–2026 Bega course has achieved strong participant satisfaction, measurable shifts in landholder attitudes toward productive forestry, and meaningful follow-on activity through SEAN and its emerging programmes.

The South East Agroforestry Network, which grew directly from the Commonwealth's initial investment in the 2022 course, is now a functioning regional organisation with an annual events programme, a peer support pilot, and growing connections to the broader forestry industry. This represents a return on investment that extends well beyond the course itself — it is building durable regional infrastructure for private forestry knowledge, practice, and collaboration.

The course coordinator and SEAN acknowledge the ongoing support of the South East NSW Regional Forestry Hub and the Australian Government in making this programme possible.

