

From advisory to regulatory land management

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Introduction

We are all gathered here today because of our interest in grasslands and rangelands. There are many challenges in managing and the improvement of grasslands. Our family enterprise revolves around livestock and seed stock as part of the solution for good management and on-going pasture improvement. We have come to believe that the less you disturb the soil the better, and our pasture sowing has been undertaken preferably without a cover crop. Within central western NSW, on-going natural resource management (NRM) involves social, economic and environmental issues. These three issues have to be balanced. Successful NRM cannot work if they are not all considered.

We have eight adjoining properties totalling 27,000 ha and run up to 40,000 dse with approximately 20,000 ha developed to perennial pastures. We also grow up to about 3,000 ha of fodder crops in winter and summer over long rotations. The enterprise is run with my wife Elizabeth, sons Paul and Denis, daughters-in-law Sarah and Kristy and their seven children. We have two permanent and five casual employees.

Before regulation

Prior to the introduction of SEPP 46, we experienced a period of progress where there were many opportunities for farm development. Whilst challenging, this was also a time of great rewards. During this period, regulations had little effect on farm management, although some Deed Titles on Crown Land required the management of woody weeds. This management was on 10% of a property and needed to occur within the first two years. Within 11 years the whole property needed to be ring-barked, except for edible species, and from then on, it was to be maintained as such. However, before the 1950's, poor management practice, rabbits and the

inability to easily transport stock led to over-grazing and a high levels of land degradation.

Advisory

Between the 1950's and 1990, advisory agencies such as the Soil Conservation Service of NSW and the Department of Agriculture became very active. In central western NSW, we saw the emergence of great advisory personnel such as Dick Condon, Geoff Cunningham, Paul Lukins, Phil Doyle, Gus Shaw, Ray Thompson and many others. Their knowledge and skills resulted in an unmeasurable influence on so many rural communities in western NSW, which directly resulted in landscape improvement. I cannot thank them enough, as our farm enterprise has benefited from involvement with them. Many of us owe these individuals a great deal of gratitude.

In 1961 we started a program of land restoration. This commenced with the purchase of a D7 and three Chamberlain ploughs with seed boxes. It was our sole intention to eliminate undesirable native species like wire grass (*Aristida*) corkscrew (*Austrostipa* spp.) and invasive native species. We were encouraged to introduce exotic species by advisory agencies. The first pasture species we attempted to sow were Lucerne (*Medicago sativa*), Barrel medic (*M. truncatula*), Veldt grass (*Ehrharta* sp.) and Wimmera Rye grass (*Lolium rigidum*). In addition, we started growing oats for grazing. All of a sudden there was a tremendous difference in what the landscape could deliver. Sheep responded well and it gave us the opportunity to upgrade them. For the first time, our livestock could express their true genetic potential. Our enterprise was in top gear. In 1965 we constructed a 12-stand woolshed to cope with the extra sheep numbers. We purchased our second D7 in 1968 to accelerate this development. In this same year, pasture improvements were progressing well enough to

allow us to move into beef cattle. Prior to this, running cattle had not been an option. With advice from the then Department of Agriculture Senior Beef Cattle Officer, Phil Doyle, we also commenced performance recording on a herd of approximately 400 breeders.

Our first experiences endeavouring to establish perennial grass species had very limited results. Trying to establish pasture species under a cover crop proved a no-goer. It was a deliberate management procedure to put as many pasture varieties into the pasture mix as possible, as we didn't know which species were best adapted to our environment. We tried anything we could get our hands on. We introduced Premier digit (*Digitaria smutsii*), American buffel (*Cenchrus ciliaris*), Lucerne, Barrel medics and some of the more adapted clovers. Phalaris (*Phalaris aquatica*), Cocksfoot (*Dactylis glomerata*), Rhodes grass (*Chloris gayana*) and Bambatsi Panic (*Panicum coloratum*) are not persistent in our environment so were not included in our pasture mixes.

Geoff Cunningham provided advice that initiated what was to become decades of water spreading. For granite degraded country, where we wanted to stabilise the landscape, we put in 200 miles of contour banks. The effectiveness of the contour and water spreading banks is still evident from work started over 40 years ago.

During this 'development period' other management issues became evident. The water spreading improvements, better improved pasture and grazing management created a major unforeseen problem. The introduction of cattle and improved pastures encouraged kangaroo invasion to unbelievable proportions. Kangaroo numbers were impossible to manage by shooting, and we had to come up with a solution to fix this major problem. We developed the Westonfence®, which gave us a fence system that was cost-effective, easy to put up and was low maintenance. The development of this fencing system has had more impact on our grazing enterprise than anything else we have done. It gave us total grazing pressure control.

The result of this was amazing. We now see a variety of the more desirable native species

back in our landscape, and the function of the landscape has been greatly improved. The Westonfence® has grown from our intended own use to an expanding business that services every state on the mainland, and has had interest from overseas. The system is now used for all types of animal control.

We had a rewarding enterprise, established livestock were performing, and a seed stock program was implemented with both sheep and cattle. The manufacturing enterprise was growing and expanding and the next generation had a strong desire to return from boarding school to be a part of and continue what started four generations ago. I consider this my greatest reward!

Regulatory land management

All good things can come to an end. Unfortunately political influence has greatly reduced the advisory capacity servicing the management of natural resources. The introduction of SEPP46 and The Native Vegetation Conservation Act had implications for areas being developed and areas that had great improvement potential. The Act did not appear to have an impact in areas where development had occurred, or landscapes that were woody weed free. Areas like our region had to wear the major cost of these new regulations. People that were affected were not happy, as the Act had an enormous impact on equity levels. Some properties became unviable and, where invasive native species were abundant, regulation was causing further land degradation. Most of us do not have a problem with sensible regulation. However, a 'one-rule fits all' regulation did not appear to be able to work. There are many issues to address and minority groups of landholders should not be discriminated against nor be expected to wear all the costs of conservation.

The Native Vegetation Conservation Act that is protecting native vegetation was causing the woody weed problem to continue and further degradation in the landscape to occur. Because of this, I became involved in the argument to have woody weed infested areas viewed differently under the Act, initially as Chairman of the North Lachlan-Bogan Vegetation Committee, and then as a board member for the Central

West Catchment Management Authority. Government was aware that people in regions that it has most impacted on by woody weed infestations were not accepting these regulations. All the meetings, rallies, blockades, enquiries, investigations and commissions indicate there are major problems with the Act. People have to take ownership of an acceptable conservation policy. It has to consider the social, economic and environmental outcomes. If conservation and environmental need is proven, then the whole nation has to wear the cost, as happens in other countries.

There has been some progress with invasive native species. The Western CMA and the Central Western CMA established a partnership to address this over 100-year problem. A working Invasive Native Species (INS) group was formed of which I was a part. It was a rewarding group to work with. The University of New England were contracted to do trials within the Cobar Pediplain area affected by woody weeds. The results from this gave us scientific data to support the development of INS management procedures that have been widely accepted among landholders. The results following management and favourable seasonal conditions where work has been done are very impressive. This has been a great outcome, due to a lot of commitment and effort by the management team and both CMAs.

From this opportunity, our enterprise has made application for an INS PVP, and this should allow us to complete all our development need. Following government vegetation regulations we were almost at a standstill. Areas of regrowth that emerged since the 1990 flood have been partially managed to maintain our legal immunity. There has been a substantial area of 2,600 ha left untreated, and this has further degraded to be a non-productive area, capable of carrying little domestic stock for over 10 years. However, if this area stood alone as a home maintenance area, as it was when selected by a Grand Uncle of mine in 1914, the owner would be out of business and on welfare payments. It supports feral animals and is becoming further degraded to a stage of becoming a sterile wasteland. Hopefully, with favourable results

from our INS PVP application, we can make an investment to control invasive shrubs and return this landscape into a viable, productive and vastly improved environment.

Conclusions

Currently, the central west CMA does offer advisory help, but there is further need to have the community engaged in the process of NRM improvement. The legacy left by some past extension staff (e.g. water ponding at Nyngan on scalded areas and water spreading on suitable areas) are examples of positive outcomes. There is need for landholders to further seek the minor variations available under the Act and to raise issues of concern with CMAs, so that they can together design the best outcomes of NRM management. Many of the properties you will visit as part of the field trips have resulted from training received and financial support to trigger good NRM outcomes. The direction coming from some government departments based in Sydney is further separating such partnerships. Partnerships cannot be supported if the advisory capacity is lost from regions. This I believe is the only way we can get land managers to take ownership of good NRM direction.

It concerns me that young people are being lost from rural communities. Services are being encouraged to grow in major centres and cities, and small communities continue to become isolated. The next generation are questioning being part of agriculture. They are seeking careers that are urban-based, especially the smarter academic ones. Agriculture needs talent from the younger generation, as we need to manage smarter to survive. Agriculture is being adversely affected by the centralisation of resources and 'minds'.

I will leave you with a reflection: Every civilisation in the past that lost its agricultural capacity has collapsed in a short time.