

# Investigating options for innovation in investment and policy models for rangelands

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## Abstract

The National Rangeland NRM Alliance (The Alliance) is a collaboration of 14 rangelands natural resource management bodies operating across 81 per cent of Australia's landmass. The group works together and with partners to gain traction where individually they often have little. While, it can seem confusing to have Cape York and Western NSW in one group, the members have found that the basic issues for NRM are the same. Of course, it is vital that on-ground delivery is adjusted for local environments.

The Alliance together with industry, agencies and communities have produced the Australian Rangelands Initiative to provide guidance for the long term investment in the management of the natural resources of the rangelands of Australia. This aims to overcome issues of the changing focus of government funding programs.

The Alliance has been particularly active over the past 5 years in responding, and providing input, to Government policy and programs for natural resource management. The aim is to have the rangelands recognised as a significantly different operating environment and deserving of appropriate alternative policy and funding approaches.

The Alliance has begun a process of investigating alternative investment models and how policy adjustments may be able to overcome some of the pitfalls of short term funding in an environment where change occurs across large areas over long time frames, often interrupted by large climatic variability. It is these options which the Alliance wishes to introduce and discuss with the ARS Conference audience in April 2015.

## Introduction

Stafford Smith and Cribb (2009) argue the case for the rangeland voice to be recognised, despite the low, widely dispersed population and with limited political influence, particularly in comparison with the more densely populated coastal and temperate agricultural areas of Australia. They argue that a different governance structure needs to be implemented for the rangelands - this structure is essentially one of support for rangelands being agreed to by the Australian people: however implementation is carried out at the regional or local level.

Rola-Rubzen and McGregor (2008) estimated that the rangelands and its people generate some \$91 billion annually in gross revenue (including \$45 billion in Gross Regional Product). This income contributes to Australia's economy through mining, tourism, land management, pastoralism, service industries, manufacturing and the arts. It is very important to note that all of these industries are based on the natural resources of the rangelands.

This Australian Rangeland Initiative requires a good stable policy and program environment to achieve its stated aims and this has driven the Alliance to consider a number of items. The two main questions are:

1. Is there an investment model which can better serve the rangeland people and environment?
2. Is there an appetite for a range of Rangeland interest groups to agree and promote policy positions which can benefit the rangeland people and environment?

### **Investment model**

The first question we investigated regarding a change to how investment is made was the concept of a Rangeland Trust. This would be a long term investment fund that could be drawn on to supply resources to long term activities, but also flexible to local/changing needs in time and space. Simple, right? We thought it would have all the answers. However, it turns out it isn't that simple, e.g. Managing a Trust without becoming another level of bureaucracy, is difficult. Despite discovering the shortcomings of the Trust idea, the reasoning behind the need for a Trust i.e. the provision of long-term funding certainty, yet flexibility, still stands. The challenge is to find an applicable model.

The current short term funding cycles, that contain temporal, spatial and issue-based constraints, often fail the land managers, communities and environments of the rangelands. The Rangeland Trust concept is a simple, local and long term solution for investment in a massive area of Australia, where dealing with natural resource issues in a short term way is expensive and often ineffective. In addition, such an approach can have detrimental effects on regional employment and community viability.

The Alliance identified a number of advantages in the development of a Rangeland Trust as a long term flexible funding source for the delivery of the Australian Rangeland Initiative. These provide good guidance for assessing alternative funding models and whether they will give an improvement over the current situation.

The Alliance has identified the following advantages of moving towards a Rangeland Trust approach:

- It will give greater leverage to attract private and industry investors, particularly if frameworks can be developed to encourage investment including tax incentives;
- It will allow flexibility which is required to deal with the extreme climatic variation and spatial size of the rangelands (e.g. drought effect on a pasture regeneration project or flooding interrupting feral pig management. Currently the money is fixed to both the issue and location. The Trust arrangement would mean that the money could be diverted until conditions are more favourable for the specified activities to occur.);
- It will allow time for capacity to be developed so issues are dealt with in the most effective manner;
- It allows for short term projects to assist with immediate impacts of issues such as drought and supplies a mechanism for the longer term activities needed to avoid future emergency situations;
- It will allow for regional and remote social infrastructure to be supported, the appropriate support for land managers in their businesses will ensure they remain viable and productive contributors to their industry and communities;
- It will support the local interactions and linkages between government programs and non-government sector which assist in providing long term employment for Indigenous people;
- It will assist in managing the impact of NRM support staff leaving communities when short term funding ends and contracts cannot be renewed, impacting on service capacity and community viability;
- It will allow for a simplification of the NRM programs which currently result in overcomplicated messages which can confuse and distract from dealing with the issues on the ground with land managers;
- It will allow for more innovative approaches to incentives for landholders to be developed and implemented;

- It will allow for long-term consistency in terminology, so that landholders and all Government agencies, as well as other organisations involved can be clear about the NRM program in terms of program names, objectives, approaches and staff.

The Alliance will continue to investigate and test the applicability of different investment models with its partners and interest groups. This will be done in conjunction with discussions of options for influencing the policy environment for rangelands management.

### **Policy adjustment**

The Rangeland NRM Alliance, in learning more about Trusts and different governance models and how they are being used across the world, noticed that a number of people we spoke with mentioned the need for a more collaborative approach to policy adjustment for the rangelands. We, as single group, lone voices, find it difficult to get traction. Greater traction may have more chance of achievement if work is done on coordinated fronts.

In conversation with policy influencers and government staff there was repeated acknowledgement that there is little or no corporate memory for rangeland issues in the government or parliament so we all regularly “start from scratch” in policy discussion and development. This raises the question; Is there an opportunity to provide that corporate memory?

The Alliance is currently considering how best to work with other interest groups to ensure that the long term policies which affect the people and environment of the rangelands are providing incentives for good practice across the three policy pillars – economic, social, and environmental.

It seems there would be terrific advantage if, when the government looks for comment on the best way to design a policy that industry groups, NRM groups and conservation groups all agreed on a certain approach of support for the rangelands. A comment of ‘we the undersigned all agree that the following are the components which are necessary as a basis for good policy in this area...’ and then we can have the arguments about periphery issues. Is it possible to agree on the general structure that a policy should take? The Alliance is hopeful that it is. It is considering developing a policy forum to discuss the issues later in 2015...we’ll let you know if it goes well!

### **References**

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