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The Australian Rangeland Society

RANGELANDS USERS AND THEIR ABILITY TO CO-EXIST WITH UNIONS
IN THE 1980'S.

By Geoff Rodda - "Nagaella", Broken Hill

Australian Rangelands users go into the 1980's in trepidation.

Firstly they are the victims of a vicious circle that has been with us since "indexation" was brought in. The escalating effects of world parity fuel pricing would be slightly easier to stomach if some of the "rake off" was put back into our road systems. The scramble by a variety of sections of the community - both inside and outside the normal indexation guidelines - for more and more wages and more and more leisure time and longer holidays (which they are unable to enjoy without yet more loadings) don't seem to take much account of rural industries' ability to meet their demands when the same rural industries are "tied" into the system but receive NONE of the benefits.

In the Rangelands where the good years are traditionally few and far between, surely we can be excused for wondering why in the hell we should foot the bill with a 17½% loading for an employee or a series of employees to enjoy his or her holiday, when in fact a great majority of us haven't been able to take a holiday in years.

Perhaps we may be regarded as renegades by trying to bring in improved shearing shed designs - with Roller matting, new shed lay outs, power wool presses and round wool tables - so that those of us who shear privately with our own labour can get some benefit at least.

Recently I read that 36% of wool income was taken in the harvesting of the wool clip. If this is so, how much longer can we go on before the sheep section of our Rangelands users again become unviable? Whilst the wool industry is currently enjoying stability of a kind (on a base that it funded itself) and while surplus sheep are in demand (thanks to the export meat industry that has provided a base in this regard, despite recent troubles with Unions over the live sheep export issue) those of us who are not drought affected MAY remain viable.

However, with a floating dollar and an even stronger Yen, the ACTUAL MONETARY VALUE of the return of our export products has, in "real" terms, been declining for years. What happens to the cattle industry when it has the next recession? That Land Cruiser that cost \$6000 in 1975 now retails at \$11,000. Freight, food, fuel, fodder and naturally rents, rates and taxes have all increased accordingly due, to a degree, to pressures from their respective Unions. When the cycle turns, as it has always done and no doubt will continue to do, WHERE ARE OUR RESERVES to be able to cope with it? Where are there any that have not been eroded by inflation? I would suggest that in large areas of our Rangelands - after years of drought and lean times - that they are at best minimal.

Some will naturally say "you can't blame the Unions for all that" and I agree. Of course we can't and don't, BUT a large degree of it IS attributable to their demands. The more muscle and the more organised that a Union is, the better paid the members are. As a rough instance, a shearer shearing 120 sheep a day would gross roughly \$480 per week, whilst a mechanic (after a 4 year apprenticeship which includes 12 months at night-school) grosses around \$180 per week and they BOTH provide their own tools to carry out their trade.

You could ask "Is there an answer?" and I could only reply "Frankly, I don't know". My only suggestion would be to opt for a greater degree of flexibility between employer and employee, perhaps with extra time off taken in lieu of overtime, especially relating to weekend work round shearing and crutching times. In relation to the shearing side of the industry, I can only suggest a more open attitude on BOTH sides. If innovations are made that make shed work easier - more comfortable and less tiring for all concerned - then surely IT IS OF BENEFIT TO ALL OF US. Don't tie any section to a specific requirement, as circumstances alter cases. You could have 3 shearers in one shed all shearing 200 sheep a day, and perhaps in another 5 shearers doing 95 each per day, so the ability, needs and manning levels of each shed team would differ greatly.

Lastly, look at the wine and grape industry, hardly a Rangelands topic, but relevant nevertheless. Costs, wages and the weather forced fruit growers to look for alternatives to their traditional harvesting methods and they were found in the form of the mobile harvester. Each year we see more of them operating up to 24 hours a day, picking blocks in hours that 5 years ago took weeks to harvest. One blockie told me that "It rarely has a sickie, never needs "Compo" and doesn't cost holiday pay". We realise that mechanical wool harvesting is presently in its infancy, but I would suggest that inevitably wage pressures and other industry related costs could accelerate research, perhaps with a financial input from wool growers. If such research is successful it could be deemed - by the Unions at least - to be detrimental to their members.

In closing my key words would be to all parties:

"BE FLEXIBLE IN YOUR APPROACH AND TRY AT ALL TIMES TO SEE THE OTHER PARTY'S POINT OF VIEW".

"DON'T KNOCK INNOVATIONS BECAUSE THEY SAVE LABOUR".

"DON'T PUSH RANGELANDS INDUSTRY TOO FAR BECAUSE THE NEXT JOB THAT'S PHASED OUT BY LACK OF FUNDS MAY WELL BE YOURS OR, WORSE STILL.....MINE".