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PROVIDING A PUBLIC ACCESS SYSTEM IN THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN PASTORAL ZONE:  
THE COSTS OF EFFECTIVE CONSULTATION

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**ABSTRACT**

The "outback" is an integral part of the Australian image and attracts numerous local and international visitors who want to experience this landscape and its special features. However, in the pastoral zone, this can produce conflict with the pastoral lessees, who have a long term interest in managing sheep and cattle enterprises on pastoral leases on this Crown Land.

In a bid to resolve these conflicts in the South Australian pastoral zone, the recent Pastoral Land Management and Conservation Act (1989) includes a requirement for the provision of a formal public access system. The objective is to provide a proper balance between the operational requirements of the pastoral industry and the desires of the community to enjoy "outback" lands.

The brief also includes a requirement to define access rights and restrictions for use of these routes and for general travel off these routes. There is a further requirement to consult with all interested parties in the process of selecting public access routes.

In this paper, the steps in the consultation process have been analysed for their effectiveness and relative importance, for application to later stages of the process and in other situations.

The formal public access system for the South Australian pastoral zone is expected to be in place by late 1992. Together with the policies being developed to address associated management concerns, this system should resolve current conflicts and provide a balance between the access needs of the public and the ability of pastoral lessees to continue operations without significant interruption.

**INTRODUCTION**

The arid zone of South Australia stretches north, east and west from Port Augusta to the state boundaries (Fig. 1). It covers an area of over 740,000 km<sup>2</sup> and is characterised by its low erratic rainfall and high evaporation rates. A specially adapted ecosystem has evolved in response to the harsh climate and inhospitable conditions in a region where extremes are normal and averages are largely irrelevant.

The major land uses, in areal extent, are pastoralism, Aboriginal lands and formal conservation reserves (Table 1.). Other uses ranging across the region are recreation, tourism, and mining.

**TABLE 1. MAJOR LAND USES IN THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN ARID ZONE**

Use	Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	% Arid Zone	% State
Pastoral leases	407,303	54.9	41.4
Aboriginal Lands	187,250	25.2	19.0
Parks & Reserves	147,254	19.9	15.0
	741,807	100.0	75.4

## Pastoral Use

The pastoral zone covers 460,000 km<sup>2</sup>, more than 40% of the area of the State. There are 336 leases, managed as 211 runs. The annual average number of stock is 1.3 million sheep and 142,000 cattle across this area. Pastoral use in this context involves the grazing of domestic stock, principally sheep and cattle, on the native vegetation. The main pasture plants are native perennial chenopod shrubs and annual grasses.

The wide variety of landforms includes the Flinders and Gawler Ranges, as well as extensive sand dunes, gibber and alluvial plains, and tablelands. The associated natural vegetation is mostly perennial grass and shrub lands, with differing capabilities to support grazing in the long term.

## Pastoral Administration

The Pastoral Land Management and Conservation Act, 1989 aims to ensure that the conservation of the arid ecosystem is balanced with an ecologically sustainable and productive pastoral industry. The Act specifies that land condition on all leases must be assessed by 1998 and stocking levels set accordingly.

The implementation of the Pastoral Land Management and Conservation Act is overseen by the Pastoral Board, which is responsible for ensuring that the objectives of the Act are met by both the Government and the Lessees. The Board advises the Minister of Lands and has representatives from the pastoral industry, the conservation movement and government agencies.

The Pastoral Land Management Programme is administered by the Pastoral Land Management Branch of the Department of Environment and Planning. The responsibilities include provision of support to the Pastoral Board, pastoral lease administration, rangeland assessment, land monitoring, surveillance of compliance with lease conditions and administration of the process for provision of public access.

## Public Demand for Access

Increasing leisure time and mobility over the past 15 years has led to a significant increase in tourist traffic into the pastoral country, particularly with four-wheel drive vehicles allowing access into the more remote areas. The situation under the previous Act was confused and confusing, with the lessee required to allow access on any "public roads, paths or ways", but with no clear definition of where that provision stopped with regard to station tracks. In recent years an increasing number of disputes over rights of access have been reported.

## PUBLIC ACCESS PROCESS

The new Act has clear procedures to establish public access routes where travel is allowed without permission being required, and to control public access outside of those defined routes. There are specific limitations in the Act to prevent disturbance of the lessees' privacy around the homestead or disruption to pastoral operations and equipment. Access to areas outside the formal public access routes is available with the permission of the lessee.

## Definitions

Public access routes are to be established as *corridors* and are separate administratively from the public road system. However, the two systems complement each other and interlink on the ground. Some confusion remains in the minds of the community about the difference between a public road and a public access route, leading to the continuing misconception that uncontrolled camping would be allowed automatically within 50 metres either side of public access routes.

## Consultation Process

The Act specifically requires consultation with all affected lessees, with the local Soil Conservation Boards, with other interested parties and with the general public.

The responsibility for determination of public access routes lies with the Pastoral Board. The Board has formed a sub-committee, the Public Access Consultation Committee (PACC), which is steering the consultation process and undertaking the work of determining the routes.

The task is being addressed by districts, with the first district to be tackled being the prime tourist region of the Flinders Ranges. This district has been selected because it has the most urgent need for resolution of current conflicts and the most contentious issues (Fig. 1.).

The process undertaken for selecting the routes is outlined in the timetable shown in Table 2. Preliminary submissions were invited from 13 known interest groups, and seven of these responded with proposals for routes. From these submissions and the experience of the PACC members, a list of issues was drawn up for attention. These included:

- width of corridor (suggestions from 50 m to 1 km)
- how to control camping along the corridor (nucleated or dispersed)
- how to control visitor behaviour
- who is responsible for maintenance of the routes
- concern about public liability for injury on routes
- need to protect sensitive heritage and conservation sites
- should the routes be signposted and who pays?

A major public meeting was called to inform people of the proposed process for selection of public access routes from the preliminary proposal put forward. The main purpose of the meeting was to invite comment on the key issues and the selection process, and to talk about the continuing process of consultation.

A public meeting, held in the Hawker Institute on a Sunday afternoon in June 1991, was attended by 130 people. After initial mistrust that the decisions had already been made, participants agreed that the meeting was very useful and they could see that several further opportunities for effective input remained. The key outcomes of the meeting were to establish a mailing list for further contact, and the nomination of a User Representatives Panel to assist the PACC in the actual route selection process.

Comments were recorded from the public meeting on a series of draft criteria for selection of routes, and a list of priority issues causing concern. This material was referred to the Public Access Co-ordinating Committee and the User Representatives Panel for consideration.

The User Representatives Panel consisted of:

- 2 pastoral lessees (northern and southern sections)
- 2 Aboriginal representatives
- 2 conservation representatives
- 3 tourism operators (2 lessees, 1 coach operator)
- 2 four-wheel drive club representatives.

Independent facilitators played a key role in the process, ensuring that all views were given a fair hearing, firstly at the public meeting and then through the route selection process. Their presence contributed greatly to the positive and co-operative atmosphere which was achieved in the User Representatives Panel meetings, even when discussing the most difficult issues.

A draft network of routes was released for public comment in February 1992, along with draft statements on how each of the key issues would be dealt with.

FIGURE 1. Land Use Arid Zone South Australia

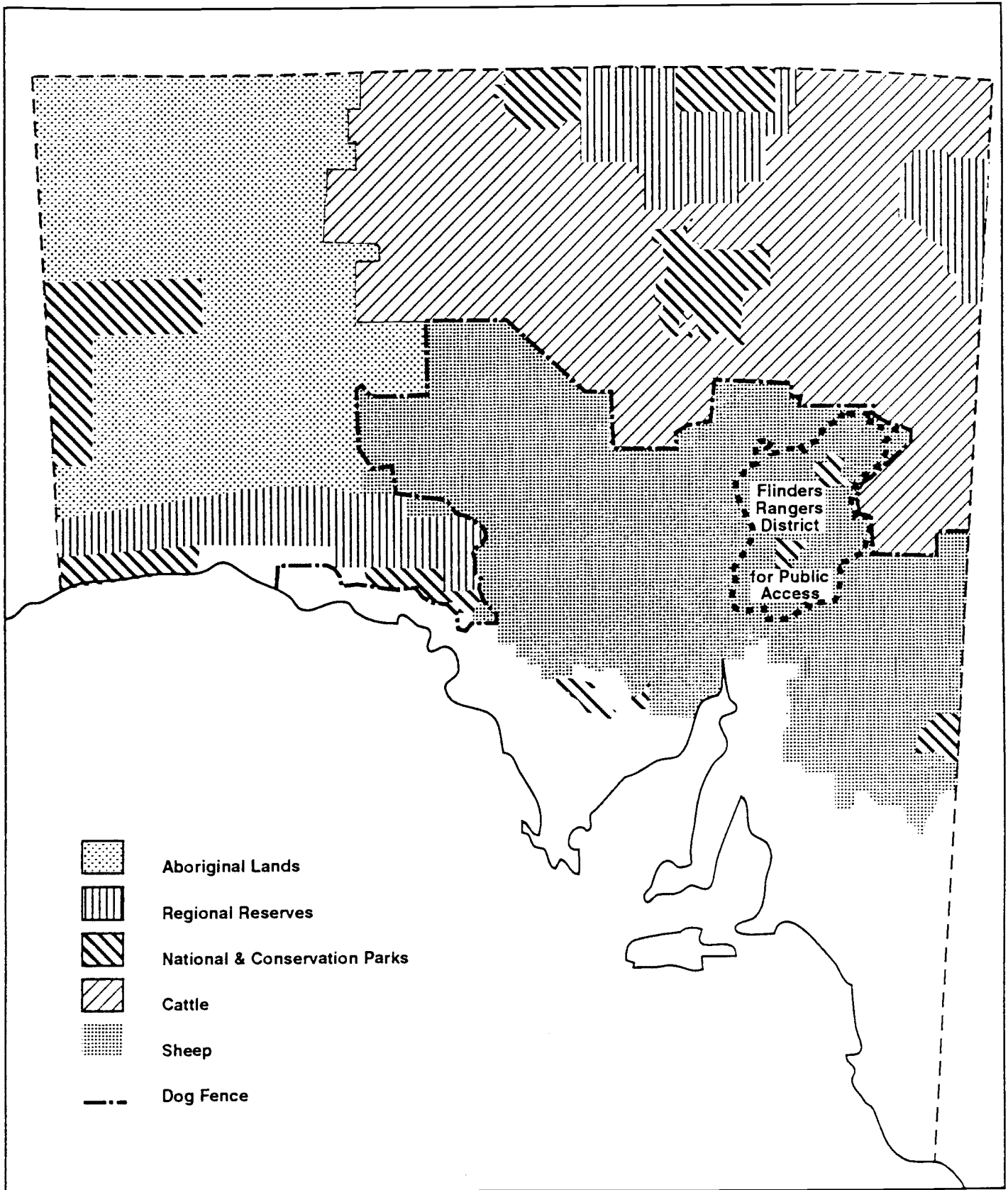
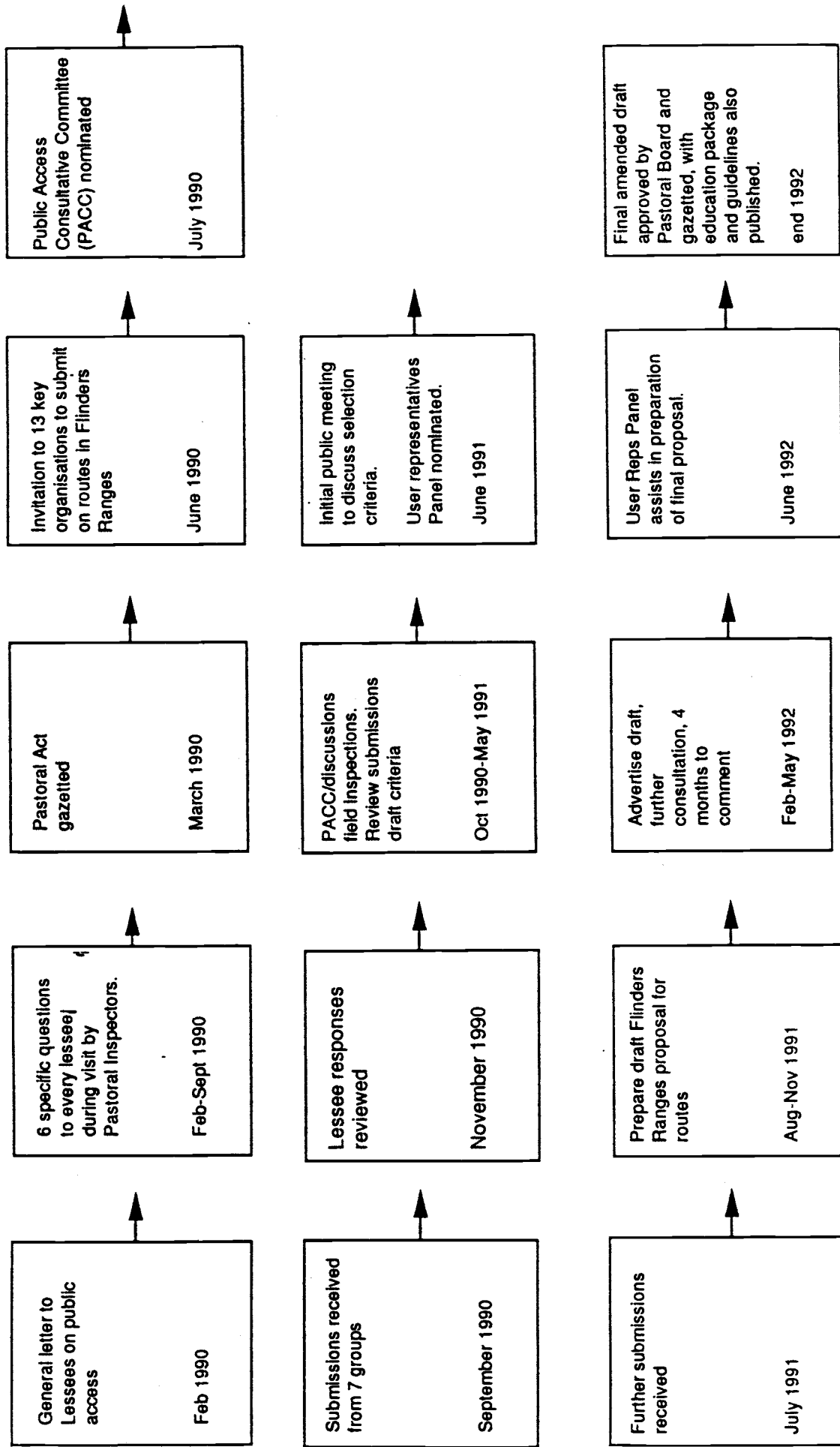


TABLE 2. Public Access Consultation Timetable for Flinders Ranges District



The public access routes were shown in three categories, ranging from those already agreed to by the lessees, through those still to be negotiated with the lessees due to minor problems, to those likely to be strongly opposed by the lessees due to major problems from their viewpoint.

The User Representatives Panel met again to discuss the responses in June 1992. The initial recommendation for a public access network of 30 routes in the Flinders Ranges District is expected to be gazetted by the end of the year. Routes for the balance of the pastoral zone should be completed in the following 12 months.

## DISCUSSION

The detailed consultation process which has been undertaken for the Flinders Ranges District far exceeds the legal requirements for consultation on this issue, but the contentious nature of the issue demanded additional efforts to involve the interest groups, in order to find practical solutions to conflicting views. The design of the process used, based on advice from professional facilitators, incorporated many features to defuse potential controversy and heated argument, to involve as many people as possible, and to have representatives directly involved in the preparation of the draft proposal for a public access network.

The costs of the process have been relatively high (Table 3), with approximately \$21,000 in direct costs. However, this investment is considered to be essential to achieve reasonable agreement with all parties. Continued agreement and support is essential, as lack of co-operation during implementation could prevent effective operation of the system.

Some of the stumbling blocks which need to be overcome in such a process include:

- historical 'baggage' of past disagreements and distrust of government
- rural 'myths' which magnify past incidents and problems
- political grandstanding by key community figures
- slow process of changing views
- destructive comments and personal attacks
- lack of understanding of modern consultation processes
- representatives may be in agreement, but their constituency may also need to be convinced.

The design of the consultation process took these potential problems into account, including:

- allowing time for personal statements by representatives
- recognising the need to build faith in the process and personnel involved, and allowing time to establish working relationships
- taking time to explain that 'taking comments into account' cannot mean that all views expressed are adopted unchanged
- offering multiple opportunities for input
- keeping information flowing at all levels (to representatives, to general public)
- checking that all interested parties were being kept informed and involved, not just a select inner group
- choice of neutral meeting sites in the local district, and use of independent chairmen or facilitators
- giving a guarantee that no routes would be gazetted until the individual lessee's concerns had been alleviated and the United Farmers and Stockowners representatives were satisfied that adequate provision had been made on issues such as maintenance and liability.

It was a common feature of discussions that past incidents were multiplied and exaggerated beyond their true context, but it was the assessment of the committee that conflicts occurred relatively rarely and were caused by only 5-10% of travellers. Often it appeared that local or regional people were concerned in reported incidents, although this was never admitted and the urban visitors were universally blamed.

**TABLE 3. CONSULTATION COSTS FOR PUBLIC ACCESS PROCESS IN THE FLINDERS RANGES DISTRICT**

DIRECT COSTS

<b>Public Meeting (June 1991)</b>		
accommodation	9 @ \$65	\$594
dinners	2 x 9 @ \$30	\$540
hall hire		\$ 50
sound system		\$150
catering	(afternoon tea) 150 @ \$3	\$450
travel	2 cars @ \$45/day flat rate	\$310
facilitators	fee	\$500
	preparation 5 hours @ \$65	\$325
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$2919</b>

<b>Panel meetings (2 x 1 day, 2 x 2 days, 1 special UFS meeting)</b>		
hall hire	5 @ \$30	\$ 150
lunches	7 x 18 @ \$5	\$ 630
dinner	2 x 18 @ \$20	\$ 720
accommodation	2 x 15 @ \$65	\$1950
charter flights	4 @ \$1100	\$4400
travel	1 x 2 cars @ \$45/day	\$ 310
travel reimbursement	4 x 8 @ av. \$230	\$7360
facilitators	5 days x 6 hours @ \$85	\$2550
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$18,070</b>

INDIRECT COSTS (SALARIES)

<u>Public Access Co-ordinating Committee</u>		
8 meetings x 8 members x 3 hours @ \$45*/hr		\$8640
1 x 2 day inspection x 6 members x 19 hours @ \$45*/hr		\$5130
travel and accommodation: 6 x 2 @ \$55		\$ 660

<u>Pastoral Management Branch</u>		
supervision, administration & support additional to meeting time:		
Manager	5%)	
Co-ordinator	25%) @ av. \$100,000/yr*	\$80,000
Executive Officer	50%)	

\* salary costs are calculated at 2.5 times salary as per standard consultancy quotes to cover all overheads

The committee also found itself a target for frustrations relating to incidents and decisions from years past, involving other governments and previous public servants. However, as representatives of "the government", they were held responsible for all past actions.

An additional frustration was the realisation that, although the representatives themselves changed or modified their views as a result of the intensive series of panel meetings, their organisations and fellow members did not. Further efforts were required to convince these groups that the recommendations of the User Representatives Panel were fair and sound.

A special meeting was held with regional representatives of the United Farmers and Stockowners Association. It was found necessary to draw up legal agreements with lessees to resolve concerns about key issues, including provisions for:

- indemnity to be granted to lessees against any claims for damages
- agreement that the Pastoral Land Management Branch would cover the costs of signage, gate replacement and track diversion
- maintenance to be met from a Public Access Route Maintenance Fund
- camping to be allowed along routes, apart from restrictions around waters and buildings
- two weeks' notice to be required for temporary closures of routes by lessees.



These measures appear to have satisfied the over-riding concerns of lessees which initially seemed insoluble and likely to prevent implementation of the access system. Once solutions for the general issues relating to access have been agreed for the Flinders Ranges District, it is anticipated that these principles can be applied throughout the pastoral zone with little modification. Thus the selection of public access routes in the balance of the pastoral lands can be completed relatively quickly.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The intensive consultation process conducted for the selection of public access routes in the Flinders Ranges District has proved to be very worthwhile, and is considered to have been an essential ingredient in reaching agreement on a series of very difficult issues. It has been a fundamental step in ensuring that the public access program can be implemented successfully on the ground.

The involvement of a user representatives panel in the actual review of proposed routes and preparation of a draft district proposal has proved to be an effective approach. Representatives of opposing views reached a significant degree of agreement and compromise on the routes to be included in the draft network. These representatives were also being asked to help to formulate solutions to issues they themselves had raised as being obstacles to the implementation of the access system.

The consultation process has been time-consuming and expensive in terms of funds and staff resources. However, all involved agree that the conflicts between opposing points of view could not have been resolved without a program of this intensity and detail. The costs invested now will save the costs of disputes further down the line, as well as building better relationships between administrators, lessees and other user groups.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The public access consultation process has been a team effort, involving the Public Access Co-ordinating Committee, members of the Pastoral Board, the volunteer User Representatives and the two professional facilitators. All of these people have put in many hours and have been willing to make significant compromises in order to reach the final recommendations. The process would not have been effective without their strong commitment.

Colin Harris, former Chairman of the Public Access Co-ordinating Committee, and Leith Yelland, Manager of the Pastoral Land Management Branch, provided constructive comments on the draft paper. Trish Fraser of the Pastoral Land Management Branch drafted Fig. 1.