

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE AUSTRALIAN RANGELAND SOCIETY
BIENNIAL CONFERENCE**

Official publication of The Australian Rangeland Society

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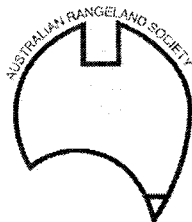
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The Australian Rangeland Society

REGIONAL PLANNING FOR CLEARING AND CULTIVATION IN THE WESTERN DIVISION OF NSW

S.W. Cover

Department of Land and Water Conservation, PO Box 1840, Dubbo NSW 2830

THE NRMS PROJECT AND THE OBJECTIVES

The history of land administration in the Western Division over the past 20 years has been characterised by major legislative change, significant policy initiatives, embargoes on development and delays in giving clear direction to the wider community.

The Department of Land and Water Conservation (DLWC) has recognised for some time that a 'regional planning approach' to the assessment of clearing and cultivation activities would have a number of clear advantages to support the current 'site by site' process.

In 1994 the DLWC initiated the 3-year project 'Regional Planning for Clearing and Cultivation' to investigate clearing and cultivation issues within two regions of the Western Division of NSW.

These regions are the Northern Floodplains of the Upper Darling and Barwon River catchment and the Southern Mallee covering the Shires of Wentworth and Balranald. The Regional Planning project is funded through the Natural Resources Management Strategy (NRMS) of the Murray Darling Basin Commission (MDBC) and is supported by the Lower Murray-Darling and Western Catchment Management Committees of NSW.

The project objectives are to:

- form a Committee for the sharing and exchange of information;
- produce a Discussion Paper and Reference Paper;
- identify the impacts of the activities;
- develop a sustainable plan;
- explore the alternatives to clearing and cultivation.

To fulfil a commitment to full community participation, DLWC has brought together landholder, conservation, Aboriginal, local government and agency representatives into an Advisory Planning Committee for each planning region.

THE DISCUSSION PAPER

The issues raised in the Discussion Paper represent the opinions of the members of each Regional Planning Committee. The paper gives an overview of clearing and cultivation activities and their impacts. The interest groups have identified their issues through a series of workshops, discussions and meetings and a total of 159 issues have been raised by all groups in the discussion paper.

The planning approach has been to assess clearing and cultivation activities against the background of the predominant land use - pastoralism. This is the first time in the Western Division that the government agency responsible for leasehold land and its administration has undertaken a comprehensive consultative program **prior** to a plan being drafted.

The issues raised by the Planning Committees include concerns related to Ecological Sustainable Development (ESD), best management practices, community participation, conservation incentives and alternative landuses.

EXISTING CONTROLS ON CLEARING AND CULTIVATION

In dealing with the issues, all interest groups must recognise the current legislative and approvals process which the DLWC administers for clearing and cultivation. In the Western Division these activities require authorisation under the *Western Lands Act (1901)* and consent from the Western Lands Commissioner (Regional Director, Far West Region of DLWC). Prior to any approval, the Western Lands Commissioner must be satisfied that there is not likely to be a significant effect arising from clearing and cultivation on a range of environmental, economic, cultural and social values.

The *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act (1979)* requires assessment of likely effect to the fullest extent possible. Consideration must also be given to a range of other State Government Acts such as the *Threatened Species Conservation Act (1995)*.

NEXT STEPS FOR THE PROJECT AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Following responses from the community, the DLWC will consider, sort and act on the resolution of issues and take appropriate action.

Through this project, the DLWC and the community have an opportunity to implement a strategic change in the nature of development in the Western Division. There are opportunities for all interest groups to participate in a responsive, community-based, regional approach. This approach will improve the 'site by site' assessment, which cannot reliably account for regional trends and impacts.

The DLWC is committed to working towards a community-based, regional assessment and approvals system which actively involves key industry and community groups.

In recognition of the difficulties associated with 'site by site' assessment, the DLWC must develop an 'activity-landtype' based approach for policies.

This approach will require considerable support from Catchment Management Committees, Western Lands Advisory Boards, farmer organisations, conservation groups, Aboriginal communities, government agencies and other interests.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to acknowledge the following contributors to this project and paper: Murray-Darling Basin Commission, Western TCM Committee, Lower Murray-Darling TCM Committee, Bill Tatnell (NRMS Project Leader), Mark Allaway (former Project Manager), members of the Northern Floodplains Regional Planning Committee, members of the Southern Mallee Regional Planning Committee, DLWC staff - Far West Region and Western Division landholders.