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The Australian Rangeland Society

NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR RANGELAND MANAGEMENT - WHAT NOW?

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In the early 1990s, the Australian and New Zealand Environment and Conservation Council (ANZECC) and the Agriculture and Resource Management Council of Australia and New Zealand (ARMCANZ) proposed the development of a national framework for managing Australia's rangelands. The Draft "National Strategy for Managing Australia's Rangelands" was presented to ARMCANZ in August 1997 but it was recognised that too prescriptive a strategy might result in unwelcome financial burdens on governments. Consequently, the document was re-edited and re-emerged in 1999 as the "National Principles and Guidelines for Rangeland Management".

It was criticised by the Australian Conservation Foundation at the time and little, to these writers' knowledge, has been heard of it since.

It appears that the main fault of the Guidelines was that they were too general, provided little in the way of firm direction, and suggested no process for oversight and implementation at state or national level.

The aim of this paper is to suggest an oversight process and to highlight some of the issues which need to be addressed if a workable management structure for the rangelands is going to be developed.

Issues covered include:

Native Title: Much has been said on this topic and although it is probably not very productive to dwell on it too long, the fact is that it remains a major concern for the holders of pastoral leasehold land. We believe that there needs to be conducted a series of test cases to establish quite clearly the rights of all parties.

Monitoring: If credible and useful longterm trends are going to be identified then effective monitoring is essential. Not only is it important for the management of resource condition but it will become more important as the anticipated requirement for rangeland accreditation at some future date becomes reality. Increased consumer awareness means product accreditation not only requires the proof of food safety: increasingly it will require evidence of responsible management of the land which produced the food. The Europeans assert that allowing landholders to degrade their natural resources is a form of subsidy for their industry. This may have serious trade implications.

Living Areas and Diversification: Whilst lease build-up may be desirable under some circumstances it should be acknowledged that, in this era, there will be many potential landholders with off property income who might like to take on a relatively small area. There is also the possibility that individuals or groups may want to acquire leases for the sole purpose of rehabilitating them. If there is genuine commitment to maintaining a viable population in the rangelands, then governments must make all the administrative adjustments necessary to encourage people to live there.

Landcare: As it is now the year 2000, perhaps it is time for government regulation of stock species and stocking rates to cease. Providing the condition of a property's land and vegetation is improving or, at least, not deteriorating, there seems little justification for government interference.

Regional Strategies: These seem the obvious avenues through which to deliver useful outcomes at the local level. The rangelands will have to be divided into "bite sized chunks" and management committees established. These bodies should be able to access and allocate project funding, negotiate with government agencies and industry and compile progress reports.

Finally, we envisage a Rangeland Council capable of taking the lead at national and international level when rangeland issues are discussed. This should comprise representatives of all of the State and Territory peak bodies, which should be restructured where necessary so there is reasonable consistency in their functions.