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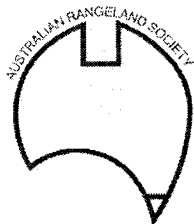
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INTERNET USE IN THE RANGELANDS

Luke Beange

Centre of Excellence for Rangeland Management, PMB 19, Trangie NSW 2823

NSW Agriculture ran a project in 1999 aimed at exploring the use of the Internet for Rangeland producers to access land management information and tools. These producers are more isolated from management information by distance, hence the Internet seems a logical way of helping to overcome the tyranny of distance. Communication between producers and technical experts could be done via Internet tools like email. Communication between producers themselves could likewise be enhanced.

The project employed a coordinator with Internet skills, John de Bruin (located at Cobar, NSW), who set up communication lines and trained producers from the semi-arid rangelands of NSW and Queensland to use the Internet. Following training, the coordinator was to facilitate producers using the Net to access best rangeland practices to implement on properties.

Producer participants were enrolled in the project by letters of offer being sent to members of *Bestprac* groups in the semi-arid rangelands of NSW and Queensland. Initial training events for participants were held in regional centres like Hay, Charleville, Wilcannia and Longreach. The outcomes of the project follow.

The main finding of the project was that rangeland pastoralists could not use the Internet effectively because their telephone lines were too primitive. Download times were too slow; therefore the cost was too high, and the connection was likely to crash. Until these problems are fixed, the potential of the Internet in the rangelands cannot be determined.

It was quite difficult and involved to find a coordinator to run a short term project training rangeland producers in the use of the Internet. However, eventually a competent technical expert was found. (Computer professionals don't want to work in the rangelands - they work in cities). Thirty five properties from the rangelands of NSW and Queensland joined the project, and were connected to the Internet, and trained in how to use it. Connection and training continued for the term of the project, indicating how much work is involved in getting both computer systems and operators operational.

Following initial connection, the producers needed continuous assistance. Halfway through the project, participants were not taking the next step, which was to use the Net to find rangeland management information. They were logging on briefly to get three bits of information:

- Email,
- Weather, and
- Wool prices,
-

and then they were logging off. They would not stay on line because the cost was too high at the speeds and reliability they were receiving. We realised that this issue was the highest priority, and decided to dedicate the rest of the project to it.

The potential for the Internet in the rangelands is good. Producers are very keen on using it for interpersonal communication. Live conversations between producers who "log on" at the same time and communicate by typing messages to their screens ("ICQ" in our case) were the most popular use of the Net in this project.

The potential of the Net for finding rangeland technical information was not fully explored, so could not be assessed by this project. Our surveys showed that use of the Internet did not change during the course of the project. Participants were not satisfied with the Net, while print and personal contact were the most popular media for information exchange. (State agencies and colleagues were the most important sources of information).

Two teleconferences during the project confirmed that use of the Net for information could not be done until skills were mastered and the phone speeds improved. Also that a good network had been set up between producers, and that the personalised training in a rangeland Internet environment was extremely important to getting producers capable on the system. This personalised "Help Desk" support was almost essential.

The Net proved not to be for everyone. Of the 35 properties enrolled, 15 got seriously involved. Frequently computer hardware and software systems were incompatible, necessitating time-consuming upgrades.

In late 1999, there was promise of big improvements in Internet access for rangelands areas. Satellite pay TV providers say they would be providing Internet access via satellite at excellent speeds and much reduced cost. The Federal Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts has announced plans to install infrastructure to deliver Internet access in remote areas at local call prices and utilising satellite technology. This project has laid valuable groundwork which will allow these improvements to be effectively utilised by rangeland residents.