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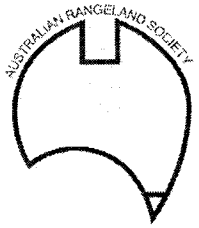

The Australian Rangeland Society

RANGELAND MANAGEMENT PROJECT SET TO IMPROVE ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT IN THE NSW LOWER MURRAY DARLING CATCHMENT.

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INTRODUCTION

The Rangeland Management Action Plan Inc. was set up in the Lower Murray Darling Catchment in 1995, when the local landholder community decided that a planned approach to the overall management of rangelands was necessary. A comprehensive regional plan was documented and launched by NSW Minister for Land and Water Conservation and Agriculture in July 2000 (RMAP). The plan began its implementation stage in June 2001 and has assisted in encouraging landholders in the rangelands of south western New South Wales to adopt improved natural resource management.

The Rangeland Management Action Plan (RMAP) is a community-based project developed to assist landholders to improve natural resource management and assist in increasing economic and social opportunities. With various avenues for improving the use of natural resources for productivity in the rangelands available, landholders have the opportunity to begin to implement management tools to improve the productivity of grazing systems and improve management efficiency through new technologies and management concepts.

The project has worked successfully with landholders in the area, working in coordination with other programs such as the South West Rabbit Control Group and the Holistic Wildlife Management group to provide the community with a strategic approach to improved rangeland management. RMAP encourages landholders to make use of available incentives for management of:

- Weed control (noxious and woody weeds)
- Grazing pressure management of native and feral animals
- Conservation Farming practices, and
- Domestic stock grazing management.

RMAP also promotes the adoption of alternative grazing systems. The consideration for sustainable rangeland management and the adoption of rotation and tactical grazing systems are promoted through courses such as the Tactical Grazing Management Workshops (NSW AG). Regardless of the grazing system in place, RMAP assists landholders to develop property plans and maps to gain further perspective of natural resource management issues on their property.

Holistic Management

The Holistic Wildlife Management Group was set up to enhance the natural Rangeland ecosystems by addressing grazing management in South West New South Wales. The project addresses Holistic property planning in a pilot study involving 10 properties. The Rangeland Management Action Plan has undertaken the project as a pilot program which can then be disseminated out to the wider community to improve business and grazing management. The project is based on the educational package "Grazing for Profit TM (RCS)" which targets landholders and stakeholders in grazing management. The group has been working over the past 2 years to identify benchmarks for their properties so they can recognise the changes in landscape.

Participants in the project have developed a better understanding of drought management and grazing methods, improved business management tools and methods to measure indicators in vegetation decline or improvement.

Pest Animal Control

Pest animals in the rangelands is a major issue which is addressed as part of RMAP. Pest animals including rabbits, kangaroos, foxes, feral goats and feral pigs contribute to total grazing pressure,

habitat destruction and predation on other species which leads to negative environmental and economic impacts.

Rabbits
Rabbits are one of the most widely distributed mammals in Australia (RMAP 1999), and under drought conditions their grazing habits can effect the survival of plants and the plants ability to set seed. The distribution and density of rabbits throughout the Lower Murray Darling region varies according soil type and vegetation cover. The rabbit populations have fluctuated over time, periodically reaching plague numbers prior to the release of the Myxomatosis virus. Myxomatosis initially reduced numbers by up to 95% (Rees pers. Comm., 1998). The release of the Calcivirus several years ago again dramatically reduced rabbit numbers. Reductions have fluctuated between 65 to 95% of levels that existed before the release of the virus (Connellan pers. Comm., 1999).

The South West Rabbit Control group was established in September 1996, a community driven project to capitalise on the opportunity presented by the release of RCD. The community approach to the control of rabbit harbour destruction has significantly contributed to the control of rabbits and total grazing pressure on properties on a regional scale. Rabbit control was identified as a priority issue by the community, and since the commencement of the project in 1996 the project has achieved outstanding results with a total of 334,787 warrens ripped. During the past year of the project 51,995 warrens were ripped as part of the Natural Heritage Trust project phase 3 . The community support behind the project has been a major contributor to the success of the project and the availability of incentives for sustainable resource management.
The project runs on a dollar for dollar basis with the landholders contribution half of the costs matched by the Natural Heritage Trust.

RMAO has been a successful community planning framework for pastoralists in the Lower Murray darling region. As the mechanisms to prioritise environmental importance changes and catchment management boards prioritise activities in the form of Blueprints, RMAP has an opportunity to continue into the future for a projected 10 years. This will enable the further implementation of the plan and continued improvement in rangeland management.

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