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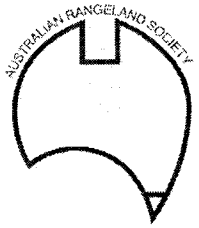

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VEGETATION MANAGEMENT PLANNING IN THE QUEENSLAND MULGA LANDS BIOREGION

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INTRODUCTION

The Lands Act 1994 (Qld) was developed to specify controls to tree clearing on leasehold land in Queensland. Since this time vegetation management on freehold land has also been made an assessable activity through the Vegetation Management Act 1999 (Qld), which was proclaimed in 2000 to amend the Integrated Planning Act 1997 (Qld). These new Acts have been enacted in response to wide community concern regarding the level of vegetation clearing in Queensland, although there has been considerable criticism of the operation of the Acts from landholders and associated lobby groups.

As part of the Vegetation Management Act 1999 (Qld) there is an opportunity to develop a Regional Vegetation Management Plan (RVMP) that would allow greater flexibility in the application of policies to suit the relevant bioregion. The process of developing a RVMP primarily aims to develop strategies in partnership with community to ensure local issues are included to protect biodiversity, avoid land degradation and maintain or enhance rural productivity. Processes developed in a RVMP also have the ability to reduce unnecessary compliance burdens on land managers.

DISCUSSION

In the Mulga Lands bioregion in south west Queensland, the approach to the development of a RVMP has been to seek wide community input under the auspices of the South West Strategy Natural Resource Management Group. Six community forums were held across the bioregion that attracted over 200 land managers. Further meetings were also held with specialist stakeholder groups, including a scientific forum on mulga fodder management with eminent scientists, land managers and representatives from government agencies.

The most consistent responses to the community consultation have centred on the need for a more flexible approach to the management of retained or remnant vegetation on properties. In particular, the issues of fodder harvesting, and selective thinning of 'woody weeds' in these areas, have generated considerable comment and advice. Other consistent messages were for an extended permit life and the importance of whole of property planning. There was overall agreement by the community that the legislation provides a suitable foundation for appropriate vegetation management planning in the Mulga Lands of south west Queensland, with agreement that a minimum of 20% of overall vegetation should be retained per property.

The issue of harvesting mulga for fodder is addressed under the plan with a proposal to deem harvesting to be a separate activity to broadscale land clearing. It is recommended that future mulga harvesting be subject to assessment that includes a full property vegetation management plan. Mulga harvesting approvals should also be subject to a number of conditions and may be valid for a period of five years, with an option for further five-year extensions of the approval at no cost. These extensions would be subject to demonstrating on-going compliance with permit conditions. There will be no exemption during drought conditions for the requirement for a permit to harvest. This proposal will give greater certainty to land managers to plan drought mitigation strategies, while ensuring a sustainable vegetation management regime is established for mulga areas.

Priority areas specified for protection in the RVMP include the wetlands, lakes and springs of the mulga lands, as well as the maintenance and enhancement of native vegetation in riparian areas. Significant buffer zones were specified for these areas, with regeneration of previously cleared buffer

zones a priority. Riparian and watercourse protection will be enhanced, with a target of no net degradation of conservation values of these areas.

Recent salinity hazard research has revealed considerable potential for salinity in the western Balonne plains sub-region. This area is the most heavily cleared part of the Mulga Lands bioregion. Some community respondents indicated that this hazard should be considered in the RVMP. The minimisation of salinity hazard within the Mulga Lands area is targeted by the retention of 30% of vegetation in contributing catchments of existing or potential discharge areas, and 100% retention of vegetation in recharge areas.

An essential component of the plan is to provide land managers and property owners with an ability to sustainably develop land in an equitable manner. Proactive approaches to vegetation management are identified and recommendations are provided to actively control and limit land degradation. Encouragement of land managers to participate in environmental management systems should assist this move to more identifiably sustainable management.

Commercial forest species are protected under the plan with encouragement for leaseholders to receive reward for appropriate sustainable forest management. The amenity and cultural values of the bioregion are also acknowledged in the RVMP, with areas of high-value identified for protection.

A code for clearing of Regional Ecosystems (Sattler and Williams 1999) has been developed for use as an assessment tool. The regional ecosystems have been translated in the plan to various locally recognized land types. This code has been developed from a revision of the rescinded 1984 leasehold tree clearing guidelines under the RVMP. Potential land degradation is minimized by declaring a number of 'land types' unsuitable for development due to steep slopes, shallow soils, intake areas or areas prone to water erosion. Other land types also have restrictions greater than the Act prescribes due to local circumstances or limitations of that land type. Provisions for appropriate land management practices and areas of sustainable development are described, along with good practice recommendations and a range of targets for the bioregion.

When finalised the plan will be reviewed by the Minister and policy advisors for Natural Resources and Mines, MACVM (Ministerial Advisory Council for Vegetation Management) and Local Government. The revised plan will then undergo further public scrutiny, prior to a final plan being developed.

CONCLUSION

The RVMP process required complex consultation processes and data analysis, however it led to the development of a plan and policies that are more appropriate to the region, give regard to production issues, are easier to interpret and apply while meeting the requirements of the legislation regarding protection of biodiversity and avoidance of land degradation. This plan will give land managers and other stakeholders greater surety and confidence to adopt sustainable management of natural resources in south west Queensland.

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