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ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS AND 'CLEAN, GREEN' PASTORALISM

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Pastoralists are coming under a new kind of pressure and this time it does not concern low rainfall or poor stock prices. Rather, this pressure is a result of growing community, government and industry demands for more responsible and accountable resource management. Added to these demands, consumers are increasingly interested in products that are safe to use and produced without harm to the environment. Pastoralists are under pressure to be 'clean and green', to produce safe, quality products in a sustainably managed rangeland environment.

To help demonstrate their commitment to responsible rangeland management and to ensure they are well placed to meet emerging pressures, pastoralists in the Gascoyne-Murchison region of Western Australia have been developing Environmental Management Systems. Through a trial funded by the Natural Heritage Trust, and supported by staff from the Gascoyne-Murchison Strategy, three stations have developed Environmental Management Systems for their stations.

What is an Environmental Management System?

An environmental management system, or EMS, is a systematic management framework that can be used by any business to assist in the task of identifying and managing environmental impacts and legally defined environmental management responsibilities. To provide the system with credibility, a business may decide to have their EMS externally audited, and certified to the ISO 14001 standard.

ISO 14001 is an internationally recognised standard for EMS. The standard sets out the generic EMS components that can be used by any business to achieve a continual improvement in environmental management. To be eligible for ISO 14001 certification, a business must identify and begin managing any significant environmental issues caused by their activities. They must also ensure that they are complying with all relevant legal obligations.

To develop an EMS, a business will usually work through the following steps:

1. Identify legal and industry obligations to manage the environment.
2. Identify environmental impacts associated with business activities and assess the level of risk presented by these impacts.
3. Establish management plans and procedures for priority issues, including issues that legally must be managed and those with a high-risk rating.
4. Monitor and record the status of priority issues.
5. Regularly review the management system and update where necessary to ensure a continual improvement in environmental performance.
6. Maintain sufficient records and paperwork to allow for an external assessment of management performance.

Why would pastoralists want to use an Environmental Management System?

The benefits of environmental management systems are being sought across agriculture, and include:

- Improved resource management - through systematic identification of improvement opportunities.
- Preventing trade barriers - avoiding trade limitations in the event of the environment becoming a non-tariff trade barrier.
- Community goodwill - building public confidence in an business's commitment to the environment
- Increased operational efficiencies - through a more effective use of inputs, and reduced expenditure on correcting environmental problems
- Reduced legal liability - through a demonstration of due diligence

Property values - potentially enhanced through better resource management

Gascoyne-Murchison Case studies

So far, the managers of three Gascoyne-Murchison stations have developed EMS: Challa, Minilya and Winderie.

- **Challa** is an 87 000-hectare lease. It has been in the Dowden family for over a century and is currently used to produce merino wool and sheep.
- **Minilya** is a beef-cattle lease occupying 286 000 hectares. The station is managed by Carpenter Agriculture, a Western Australian cattle company.
- **Winderie** is an 86 000-hectare lease run by the Kempton family. It was originally used to run merinos, but in recent years the Kempton's have been building up a herd of Boer goats; goats are now their main enterprise.

Each of these stations became involved in EMS because they were: determined to prove their commitment to responsible management, keen to make the most of the unique characteristics of the rangelands, and committed to conserving their natural resources.

In partnership with staff from the Gascoyne-Murchison Strategy, the managers of Challa, Minilya and Winderie looked at a number of different EMS approaches. Ultimately, the decision was made to trial two systems: ISO 14001 and an SQF 1000CM quality system that incorporated environmental issues.

Whilst the managers were initially attracted by the international recognition of ISO 14001, after developing systems for their stations they decided that the standard exceeded their current requirements. The managers believed that ISO 14001 would be too complex for most pastoralists to use as a starting point to EMS; feeling the standard would only be of benefit if there were direct market signals for certification. If markets demand the use of ISO 14001, the managers will consider implementing and certifying their systems.

As an alternative to ISO 14001, the managers decided to integrate environmental issues into an SQF 1000CM-quality assurance system. SQF means Safe, Quality Food. SQF 1000CM is a quality assurance system designed to enable primary producers, supplying low-risk food and fibre products, with the tools needed to demonstrate compliance with food safety standards and customer quality requirements.

SQF 1000CM is focused on product safety and quality risks. Whilst not officially registered as an environmental code, the risk assessment and management processes used for safety and quality can be applied to environmental issues to develop an EMS.

SQF 1000CM has provided the stations with a simple but recognised approach to quality assurance. Including an EMS in the system provides a means by which their commitment to responsible rangeland management can be independently verified. Whilst the environmental component of the system is not formally recognised in the way that ISO 14001 is, the managers are able to address the primary concerns of their customers, whilst formalising their commitment to the environment. The system gives them the flexibility to progress to ISO 14001 as required.

So far the managers of Challa have had their SQF system independently audited and certified: Minilya and Winderie will soon follow suit. A lot of work has gone into developing these systems and having them certified but looking at the big picture, the managers believe that their SQF systems will help them meet growing demand for 'clean, green' products.

As the managers of Challa Station say:

"With consumers wanting cleaner, greener products, just producing from the rangelands is a start. We would encourage all pastoralists to look at a system of accreditation. It won't make it rain, but it will prove to the world that you are in it for the long run."