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The Australian Rangeland Society

ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS - THE CENTRAL AUSTRALIAN PASTORAL EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the aims and early findings of a project exploring Environmental Management Systems (EMS) in the Central Australian beef industry. This project is one of 15 funded under the Commonwealth Government's EMS National Pilot Program in Agriculture.

INTRODUCTION

An EMS is a process used by businesses to identify and achieve continuous improvement in environmental management. The process is about identifying where you are now with your management, where you want to be, how you are going to get there and how you're going to know you're achieving it. In addition to improved environmental management, the potential benefits of EMS can include increased production efficiencies and yields, cost savings and being able to prove you're "doing the right thing". Whether any of these benefits will be realised on pastoral stations in Central Australia is yet to be determined.

Environmental management on Central Australian pastoral lands happens at a vast scale. Individual families are responsible for the management of total grazing pressure, water, weeds, erosion, fire and feral animals over thousands of square kilometres. The pastoral industry's landcare group, the Centralian Land Management Association (CLMA), has provided practical support for these activities for 15 years and continues to enjoy a high level of membership. The owners and managers of 15 member properties volunteered to participate in a pilot project to test the practicality, costs and benefits of EMS. The participants cover a wide geographical area and their environmental priorities vary accordingly.

We believe that Central Australia will be one of the most challenging environments for developing and assessing EMS. This is because the region is characterised by:

- Family owned businesses with limited financial and labour resources.
- An arid to semi-arid climate, with high climate variability.
- Large catchments with complex natural resource management issues.
- An extensive, low input production system based on native vegetation (average property size 3,500 sq km).
- Remoteness from the consumer, both physically and in the supply chain.

WHAT IS OUR PROJECT HOPING TO ACHIEVE?

The aims of our project are:

- To test the value of EMS in the identification, implementation, demonstration and communication of sustainable natural resource management within the Central Australian pastoral industry.
- To allow producers to determine the practicality and value of EMS for achieving improved business and resource management outcomes.
- To identify how EMS could help to improve resilience in variable combinations of climate and market conditions, which impact on the sustainability of the natural resource base and family businesses.

- To create links between property-level EMSs and soon to be developed regional Natural Resource Management plans.
- To value-add the existing pastoralist-owned monitoring system (Centre Land Watch).
- To identify EMS tools and approaches that best support the aspirations of pastoral families in arid environments.

WHAT HAVE WE DONE TO DATE?

The CLMA was able to broker agreements with government and non-government organisations to supply all known natural resource data relating to the fifteen participating properties. With the assistance of a CLMA project officer, this information has been integrated with producer knowledge to develop comprehensive environmental summaries for each property. These summaries provide the context for producers to identify environmental impacts, prioritise works, develop management and monitoring plans and showcase their stewardship. There have also been some unexpected benefits for the agencies supplying information. The demand for property-specific natural resource information has led to routines being developed to allow more efficient extraction of information from databases. This has helped some agencies provide similar products to other clients quicker than they were able to in the past. Furthermore, producers have been able to provide feedback on the accuracy of the map products and information provided by the agencies, which in turn has improved the quality of the datasets.

Some participants have found that the EMS process has helped them to record the history of their past and current environmental management activities which will, over time, become a benchmark against which they can measure changed attitudes and practices. Some have also recognised the potential to integrate EMS with their existing organic certification, Cattlecare accreditation and/or property development initiatives.

Although there is an international standard for EMS (ISO14001), our producers are not seeking certification at this stage. The significant costs of ongoing audits, the mountain of paperwork and the absence of market drivers are barriers to certification for the pastoral industry (Francis 2003, Steward and Banney 2003). Instead, our approach is to develop and implement EMSs that are consistent with the standard so that producers can easily adapt their EMS if they wish to seek certification in the future.

During the next 12 months, participants will be identifying their most significant environmental issues and will develop work plans to address these. This will be followed by a monitoring and review phase with the project due to finish in July 2006.

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