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PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT AND DROUGHT MANAGEMENT IN RANGELANDS

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable management of natural resources and development in agricultural productivity through community driven projects has been the highlight of the implementation of the Rangeland Management Action Plan. The Rangeland Management Action Plan has encouraged landholders in the Lower Murray Darling Catchment to be actively involved in the development and implementation of projects to improve natural resource management and agricultural productivity through carrying out best management practices.

During the recent drought, it was felt a deeper understanding of the needs of landholders and managers was required. Community consultation and participation through workshops was used to approach landholders to understand management practices carried out during the drought and develop a clearer understanding of how best management practices can be applied to better prepare and manage drought conditions and maintain productivity.

The usual unwillingness and difficulty to get landholders to attend and therefore participate in projects and consultations has been overcome through adopting adequate participatory learning approaches at open and relaxed community workshops.

INTRODUCTION

The Rangeland Management Action Plan (RMAP) is a community driven organisation working with landholders in the Lower Murray Darling of New South Wales. Recently during the drought, a series of ten workshops "Looking Beyond the Drought" were held throughout the Catchment. The workshops aimed to provide landholders with an opportunity to interact and share ideas, experiences and management strategies that they have implemented and that may have assisted them during the drought. The workshops were structured to provide a platform of open learning, with participants sharing knowledge and experiences from previous droughts, looking at options for recovery, and assessing information and assistance available during the drought.

More than 250 landholders attended the workshops, to contribute to the gathering of information, which was collated to provide feedback to government. While the information is not a quantitative measure of priority issues for agricultural production during the drought, the workshops provided an insight into some issues for landholders during the drought.

This paper presents a summary of issues which were repeatedly discussed at the facilitated workshops to identify how projects and drought management practices can be implemented according to landholders needs and how effective consultation can involve landholders in best management practices.

TOTAL GRAZING PRESSURE

The importance of managing total grazing pressure during the drought is vital to maintaining a level of productivity for landholders in the region. With many properties reducing stock numbers during the drought, the control of feral and native animals to manageable levels is vital. Extensive rabbit warren ripping and control programs were identified as the foremost advantage to properties in controlling grazing pressure. Management of feral goat numbers on properties was also identified. Due to a good

market for goats, landholders felt the added incentive to set up traps around watering points to control goat numbers and relieve grazing pressure was a beneficial management strategy.

The installation of controlled water points was a management strategy undertaken which landholders felt also assisted in controlling total grazing pressure. The provision of pipelined water with controlled tanks and troughs rather than open water points was seen as advantageous to retaining pasture and native feed for longer during the drought.

EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES

A major concern raised throughout the workshops was issues of assistance through the current Exceptional Circumstances (EC). Participants felt there is a need for review of the EC criteria as current eligibility measures were deemed to be ineffective and unfair. It was a widespread feeling that Exceptional Circumstances as it stands does not promote the adoption of responsible management practices, which needs to be encouraged. There is a vital need for the government to endorse a more self-reliant principle of management, rather than supply relief, which is continually provided through EC. A common feeling was that the assistance must be means and needs tested and made conditional on the adoption of responsible and sustainable management practices.

As a result of the issues raised concerning Exceptional Circumstances, some recommendations were made. A more user-friendly system should be put in place to promote positive drought management strategies and pre-drought management rather than straight handouts that are misdirected. Also a 'HECS' designed system is required, where a payback arrangement is made, when income returns to a certain level.

CONCLUSION

A number of other issues were raised as part of the workshops including: retention of core breeders and stock feeding, Farm Management Deposits, along with ideas on options for recovery. The community meetings identified that property management plans must recognise the increasing variability of growing seasons and have triggers built into management plans to react to these seasonal conditions. As a result of the community workshops, participants left feeling that the open platform meetings were a good avenue to share ideas and express opinions of drought management and drought assistance. Providing a relaxed environment in familiar surroundings ensured people felt comfortable to express their views and contribute to the workshop. A vital link in the process of community consultation is feedback, with information concerning the issues to be filtered back to the community. Land managers felt actively managing grazing pressure and working together for and during the drought is imperative, and sharing management practices with others was constructive.

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