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BALANCING CONSERVATION AND PRODUCTION IN THE WESTERN DIVISION THROUGH ENTERPRISE BASED CONSERVATION

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BACKGROUND

Despite increasing demand for landholders to place a higher priority on managing for conservation outcomes, it has not typically been economically viable for landholders to actively conserve part or all of their properties specifically for nature conservation.

WEST 2000 Plus has developed a five year pilot Enterprise Based Conservation program that provides an innovative and practical method to deliver financial incentives to Western Division landholders to balance conservation and production outcomes.

Ten properties are participating in the five-year pilot program, with projects located across the Western Division. Over 65,000 hectares will be managed for conservation outcomes, with individual project sizes ranging from 320 hectares to 23,000 hectares. Landholders will be paid an annual incentive to manage either all or part of their property specifically for conservation. The total cost of the project over five years, including annual payments and on-ground infrastructure, totals less than \$3 per hectare per year.

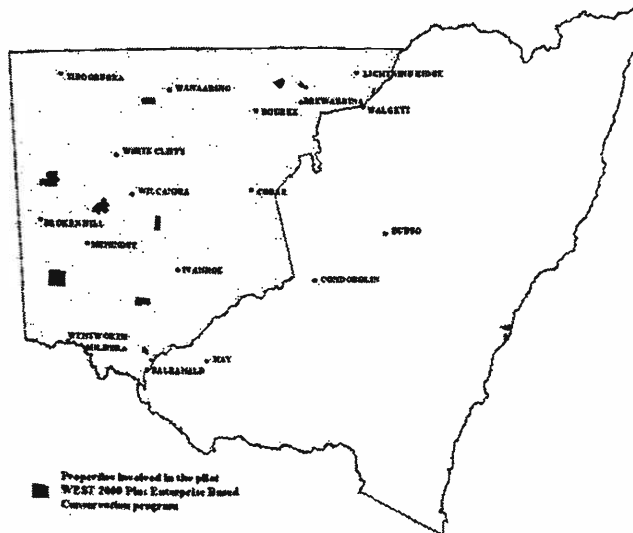


Figure 1. Location of properties in the Western Division participating in the WEST 2000 Plus Enterprise Based Conservation program.

MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Rather than simply removing domestic stock and 'locking up' country, the program is based on achieving conservation outcomes through active and adaptive management. This will include reduction of total grazing pressure, control of pest animals, control of noxious weeds and reintroduction of fire. In some cases limited grazing by domestic stock will be permitted.

The successful completion of these

agreed conservation-based management activities forms the basis of landholders receiving a series of annual payments.

SELECTION PROCESS

Expressions of Interest lodged by landholders were shortlisted by an independent assessment panel. Shortlisted projects then submitted a competitive tender for funding. The final selection of projects was based on the natural features of the site as determined by a Biodiversity Benefits Index and expert knowledge, the proposed conservation outcomes of the project and the cost effectiveness of the proposal.

ISSUES ADDRESSED WITHIN THE PROGRAM

The landholders involved in the pilot program are following two management models. One model involves removing domestic stock and actively managing the area for conservation outcomes. A total of approximately 42,000 hectares will be managed under this model. The second model will see grazing by domestic stock continuing, with the grazing pressure managed to ensure that an agreed groundcover level (40 per cent) is retained, regardless of seasonal conditions. Approximately 26,000 hectares will be managed in this manner.

The individual projects address natural resource management issues, including the conservation of European and Aboriginal cultural heritage values, maintenance of threatened species and their habitats, improved river bank stability through the management of stock along riverine corridors, and large scale management of total grazing pressure to maintain agreed levels of groundcover. Threatened fauna species such as the Malleefowl (*Leipoa ocellata*) and Pink Cockatoo (*Cacatua leadbeateri*), and the endangered ecological community *Acacia loderi* shrublands are being protected under this program.

ADVANTAGES OF THIS METHOD OF CONSERVATION

This approach recognises that prevention is better than a cure – conserving existing habitat delivers better environmental outcomes and is more cost effective than rehabilitating degraded systems. Promoting conservation as a viable alternative landuse allows landholders to diversify their income and enhances property sustainability and viability. Landholders remain the primary managers of the land, thereby maintaining the accumulated land management knowledge and skills. Paying landholders to manage for conservation allows families to remain within rural communities and continue to support rural services.

CASE STUDIES

The Beven families, Sturts Meadows Station

Located north of Broken Hill, the Beven families will be managing 5500 hectares under this program. This is the only parcel of land that is formally managed for conservation within the Barrier Ranges. The area features the spectacular Bijerkerno Gorge, historic tin mine sites, and uncommon flora species. The conservation area will remain destocked, feral animals will be controlled, and the regeneration of the plant base will be monitored. Restoration works have been undertaken on the old cookhouse chimney and baker's bread oven at the historic tin mine site.

'Our involvement in this pilot program will extend the conservation activities that we have already been undertaking, and it will provide us with a network of landholders throughout the Western Division that are undertaking similar activities', Mr Beven said.

Graham and Cathy Finlayson, Bokhara Plains

Graham and Cathy Finlayson of 'Bokhara Plains' near Brewarrina aim to maintain a groundcover level of 40 per cent across their entire property by managing the grazing intensity of domestic stock through rotational cell grazing. Controlling watering points in paddocks that are not being grazed will reduce grazing pressure from feral animals, resulting in a reduction of soil scald areas, improved soil stability and an increase in native perennial grasses.

'Our five year goals for this program are to not only maintain 40% groundcover regardless of the rainfall but to actually improve the type of pasture and increase the biodiversity of our whole ecosystem', Mr Finlayson said. 'By being involved with this program our success will be monitored and documented and will hopefully encourage other landholders to change their approach and be proactive in making the rangelands more ecologically and economically sustainable'.