

As part of a family sheep and cattle enterprise on a property of over 70,000 acres north east of Bourke, NSW, I wish to make a submission to the Inquiry into Primary Producer Access to Gene Technology. I am in favour of landholders of the Western Division of New South Wales having access to genetically improved native pasture grass species. The technology to achieve this does exist. Currently, such access does not exist and would be very important for the viability of this area.

I believe that improvement of native grass species growing in the rangeland area of NSW would be extremely important for the production of food and fibre and for the biodiversity of this area. These species do not produce enough biomass and are not very drought and frost tolerant. They are relied upon by livestock and native animals for food. Improving the grasses would mean an increase in native grass cover and better feed. There is a wide variety of native grass species across the Western Division, some more viable than others. However, the need for improvement of many species is required for the whole area.

It is essential for primary producers in the Western Division that better native grasses are produced. Unless there is improvement, many pastoral enterprises will perish. The problems of woody weeds and rehabilitation of woody weed infested areas, and climate change make it urgent. It is well known that 85% of a sheep's breeding is what goes down its throat. This means that the commercial success of pastoral enterprises depends on adequate pastures. We cannot expect the important food and fibre production from the Western Division, and the unique biodiversity that attracts tourism, to continue if this issue is not addressed. This may seem extreme. It is not. It is the reality of the situation for much of Australia's rangelands.

Every year, millions of dollars are spent funding Government departments like CSIRO and the NSW Department of Land and Water Conservation. Many requests have been made to these groups for grass development. These requests are dismissed. The only work done has been by landholders, at their expense, and by interested professionals who volunteer their time and assistance. At the same time, funds meant for work such as this are misappropriated. For example, funding for drought prevention work in the

Bourke area was spent on a new levee bank for the town. The general attitude towards the issue of native grass improvement is very relaxed, yet the consequences of doing nothing warrant much more concern. I am part of a successful 5 year biological control of woody weeds program. The program was run by a Landcare group and had a sound scientific base. This experience has given me insight into these problems. All retrospective applications for drought prevention programs and Landcare funding by our group for native grass improvement have been refused.

If the need for native grass development is to be effectively addressed, interested and qualified professionals need to be employed. The establishment of suitable research centres is also required. In NSW, the Rangeland Centre of Excellence is located at Trangie - a cropping area and not rangelands where it would be appropriate. More localized research centres need to be established within rangeland areas. Any developed species should be freely available to landholders for rehabilitation and development work they undertake. There would need to be a variety of grasses, the seeds would be priced reasonably, and they would be as tolerant and productive as the introduced buffel grass is.

As a recipient of a Churchill Scholarship, I visited the United States. There, improved native grasses have been successfully and safely used for some time and the attitude towards this issue is much better and people informed. If Australia is to compete with the rest of the world, we must investigate using gene technology to improve native grass species. We need sound programs to demonstrate the need for this. I have seen how important the information that landholders and other people have gained from our Landcare group at field days, from talks, and from our free publications is. Education and promotion are necessary. The meat that we eat comes from well bred stock lines. The grains, fruit and vegetables we eat come from crop strains improved to be more hardy and efficient. People need not be afraid of improving pasture species. They need also to be educated about the reasoning for such work, successful work overseas, and the consequences of not proceeding with it.

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