

Background information.

Coolabah Landcare Group was formed in 1996 with the main objective being to formulate a vegetation management plan for the district, which will provide for both conservation of existing biodiversity and allow sensible vegetation management and on farm development. The group is made up of local landholders (resident and non-resident) who are owners / lessees of agricultural land in the district of Coolabah.

This initiative was instigated by the introduction of the New South Wales State government's State Environmental Planning Policy No. 46 which has since been repealed and replaced with the Native Vegetation Conservation Act 1997. This legislation requires owners of private land to apply for permission to develop their properties.

Coolabah is located between Nyngan and Bourke in central – west New South Wales. There are 21 farm families involved with the plan, which covers 32 properties with a combined area of 262,697 hectares. The landholders in the district are very well represented in this plan, with only four property owners within the district not involved. The area is situated within the Bogan and Brewarrina Shires. Coolabah is a transitional area between flood plains and the Cobar peniplan and is the catchment for the lower portion of the Bogan River.

The main objectives for the group are to: -

- Return native pastures
- Conserve desirable vegetation and bio diversity
- Return property production
- Retain viable landholders

Why Plan?

By formulating the vegetation management plan it is hoped to add to the biodiversity knowledge in the district and increase basic knowledge of the local environment, both for local landholders and the general public via the publication of the plan. We need to make recommendations on maintaining diversity within the district while at the same time achieving a balance between conservation and development of properties.

A plan of this nature will provide valuable information about the Coolabah district. Research and knowledge are needed to show that conservation and primary production are not mutually exclusive but that a sensible combination of the two can lead to ecologically sustainable land management.

It was decided that planning at a district level is the best way to address the management of native vegetation in conjunction with development of properties. This plan will hopefully speed up the process of applications for development of land and enable landholders to return productivity and viability of properties and secure the future for the remaining community. In other words landholders want to be in control of their own destiny.

Problems facing landholders

Environmental Impacts

Woody shrub regrowth on the red soils of the district is regarded as some of the worst within the Cobar Peniplain. This degradation issue is a major one for the landholders of Coolabah, as the loss of pastures due, largely to the encroachment of invasive native flora or woody regrowth has seen much of the land capability for the district altered. Early land capabilities surveys indicated that Coolabah supported some of the best grazing country in New South Wales with occasional cropping. Cropping only being limited by the slope of the country or climate or a combination of both.

- Encroachment of excessive native flora has seen the decline of native grasses, which were once the dominant vegetation of the area.
- Significant decrease in grazing productivity has resulted with the decline of these once dominant pastures.
- Soils beneath areas of woody infestation are usually lacking in ground cover, these soils are susceptible to wind and water erosion, which leads to surface sealing and scalding.
- Where woody vegetation is excessive, native fauna species (especially birds and small mammals) have lost their natural food source and in many cases their preferred habitat.
- Vegetation species in these areas will never reach their full potential as their growth is impeded due to this density.
- Once open woodlands with good pasture cover have changed to dense scrub with no ground cover present.
- The balance is lost.

The cost to the landscape by not removing at least portions of dense woody vegetation cannot be calculated, but the impact on the environment and property production is extreme. The cost of removing dense woody vegetation is great but with sensible, selective clearing followed by a cropping program costs can be recovered. This method as a management tool, has been successfully used to reclaim lost pastures in the Coolabah district.

Impacts of Grazing Pressure

- Maintenance of stocking density is difficult due to unlimited, uncontrolled numbers of kangaroos, emus and feral animals.
- As woody vegetation encroaches grasslands disappear leaving less grazing land, therefore adding grazing pressure.
- Dense woody vegetation provides ideal refuge for feral animal such as pigs, goats, foxes and cats.
- Control of feral animals is almost impossible.

Impacts of Climate / Drought

The average yearly rainfall for Coolabah is 382mm, with a pattern of summer dominance. Temperatures range from a high of 34.2 degrees in January to a low of 3.1 degrees in July. Moisture can be expected to be a limiting factor during any time of the year. The district is regarded as being in a semi-arid zone. In the past cropping was seen as opportunity only, but with better approaches to management, cropping enterprises are more reliable

- Drought must be planned for.
- Dense vegetation causes management of areas to be difficult especially during drought.
- When it is important to feed stock, time spent finding animals in overgrown areas is impossible so large numbers are lost.
- Dense woody vegetation creates drought prematurely due to competition for moisture.

Impacts of Legislation

Legislation having the greatest effect on landholders of the Coolabah district includes the Western Lands Act 1901, the Native Vegetation Conservation Act 1997 and the Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995.

- Landholders feel intimidated by officers of departments enforcing legislation.
- Departmental officers are in command of landholders' livelihoods.
- Landholders' rights are dictated to by the decisions of a few with no direct knowledge of the land's capability.
- Landholders are restricted from using country, which was purchased or leased for a particular purpose.
- Time frame involved with applications is restrictive.
- Clearing depends on climatic conditions and funds available at the time.
- Some applications especially Western Division can take years to go through.
- Business management / planning is impossible under these conditions.
- Those dictating no clearing cannot decide what they want kept so they endorse no clearing whatsoever.

Conservation Measures

It is up to government bodies to really make up their minds what they want out of farmers. Do they want production or non-production? The land of the Coolabah district, which was open woodlands with extensive grass areas, now attempts to support a shrubland with rain forest density. This is not good conservation it is more like degradation. The vegetation structure has changed. In nature the country would burn periodically ensuring the land was kept open. Attempting to return the original structure is environmentally sound. The landholder does this without financial assistance, using cropping enterprises to recover those costs and remain productive and viable. Clearing and cropping as a management tool is not always recognised, but it works. The ecology benefits, it is sustainable and leads to economic and social stability.

Conservation measures must be practical to the user of the land. In this district the majority of clearing is carried out in a sensible sound way, land users know that their land is a precious and important resource and would not do anything to damage its future sustainability.

Social and Economic Impacts

Without in depth studies it is difficult to produce figures to support costs associated with conservation. If the conservation is imposed, the landholder is not likely to provide anything that will cost him without assistance; the cost is the loss of production to the landholder. Where voluntary conservation is undertaken, once again the cost is loss of production plus any fencing or earthworks associated with it.

- Blanket conservation controls imposed upon landholders stifle sustainable development.
- Sustainable agricultural development is vital in fostering vibrant rural communities.
- There needs to be sufficient economic (financial) returns to enable primary producers to remain as viable members of the local community.
- Sustainable development creates opportunities for communities in the form of increased employment and services.
- Increased employment opportunities and a healthy agricultural sector provide more cultural and social opportunities in a community and this in turn improves the ability of the community to retain its young people to attract others.
- Financially viable primary production enterprises have the ability to adapt to change and to implement new technologies.
- Non viable and financially stressed farmers are limited in their ability to contribute to the local community and in their ability to manage the natural resource sustainably.

Inquiry into the impacts of Conservation Controls imposed on landholders

Publications relating to the Western Division have been commissioned that might be of assistance in determining costs for the particular area. They are: -

“Necessary Conditions and Options for Socio-Economic Advancement. A prospective and perspective analysis of the Western Catchment Management Area of New South Wales” a report for the Western Catchment Management Committee prepared by the National Institute of Economics and Industry Research, trading as National Economics *and*

“Western Lands Review.” Final report. Summary and Recommendations.