

Reflections on the Future Use of Pastoral Lands in Australia

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Queensland pastoral lands, in spite of the best efforts of pastoralists, are deteriorating (Franks et al., 2002). There are natural resource, climatic, economic, social and management reasons for this.

The long-term viability of pastoral land will be difficult while:

- there is a major divide between the perspectives of rural and urban people on the importance of primary industries to the national economy;
- long-term planning for achieving duty of care for land is expected of rural producers and industries but not of the three levels of government;
- competition rather than cooperation exists between the three levels of government, rural industries and other pastoral land users, be they engaged in pastoral or another land use such as mining, solar farming or an Indigenous land use;
- governments fail to support and encourage rural industries to undertake an appropriate role in meeting both community and private interests; and
- the extension services provided to rural producers are primarily based on the efforts of volunteers involved in Landcare and NRM Catchment Committees.

The reflections offered by Professor Miles to the Dialogue conference are relevant:

- Drought must be considered part of our normal operating environment.
- The productivity of cropping lands and pastoral lands will continue to decline, largely due to inappropriate management by all landholders and governments.
- The need to lower total grazing pressure. This is dependent on the lowering of stock numbers to achieve a better balance for the maintenance of adequate ground and tree cover. However, to achieve enterprise and pastoral industry viability, there may be a need to resume some pastoral leases, to undertake some property amalgamations and to move into alternative use of these lands.

My previous experience within the Queensland Government indicates that there is a mismatch between the economics of pastoral use and how such lands need to be managed, an example being the failure of federal and state governments to support the economic use of eastern grey kangaroos for food and leather. This has been due in part to the mistaken belief by the general community that there is not an overpopulation of kangaroos (which has resulted from their greater access to water and improved pastures) and that kangaroos do not need to be culled, or if culling is necessary, it does not warrant the economic use of the animals culled. Clearly, such action, including the use of the meat and leather, is not

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perceived as meeting a public good. There has been a failure by the kangaroo industry and the market to expand because of concerns raised by environmental groups, especially internationally. For the industry to expand, there is a need for investment in processing facilities.

It is beholden on the three levels of government to provide a lead in seeking a way forward by:

1. Working collaboratively to arrive at long-term solutions, with any costs being shared according to the benefits that arise.
2. Seeking a consensus (hopefully nationally) on the way forward, based on scientific rather than emotional considerations.
3. Ensuring the public is kept informed on what is happening, and needs to happen, in relation to pastoral lands.
4. Removing regulatory impediments that cannot be proven to improve the economic,

social and ecological outcomes (health) of the pastoral lands.

5. Investigating non-regulatory mechanisms for the long-term management of pastoral lands to meet the public needs of those lands.
6. Only using financial assistance when this is the most cost-effective option.

Until it can be established that it is feasible for the private sector to manage the pastoral lands so as to maintain their health while remaining economically and socially viable, without ongoing financial assistance from the public sector, then the existing situation is unlikely to change. Without a major injection of public funds to have these lands remain in pastoral use, they may need to move to a use other than primary industry in order to maintain their overall health. Circumstances are likely to arise where there is a need to move ownership and management away from the private sector and towards the public sector.

Literature Cited

Franks, A. J., Playford, J., & Shapcott, A. (2002). *Landscape Health of Queensland*. The Royal Society of Queensland.



Unfenced watercourses affect water quality and biodiversity on property and far downstream (Photo: G. Edwards).

Author Profile

Now retired, Howard Briggs has had extensive experience in natural resource management at regional planning, impact assessment, research, communication, policy and operational levels with the Queensland and Commonwealth Governments. From August 2001 to March 2013, he was a consultant in policy and planning on the use and management of rural lands.



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