



Australian Landcare Management System Group

March 2008

Using land managers to care for country¹

I tortured about the simplicity of the title of my talk today.

There is this cute program in Queensland based on the theme that *every family needs a farmer* so I wondered about using a derivate of that. However *every family needs a farmer* doesn't get much traction in the inner city wine bars or with the homeless along the Brisbane River - and neither should it.

Then there is the agro-political contention that we farmers are all conservationists. However, that leads to some pretty wacky explanations about how we created our environmental problems.

Eventually I stuck with the simple title, 'Using land managers to care for country'. I did so because it is fundamental to the success of land-based policies and programs. I did so because it is too often ignored in the design and execution of policies and programs.

We need to talk about 'Using land managers to care for country' because environmental management is primarily about people and their behaviours. It is not management of natural resources, the great NRM myth.

Most farmers respond to the norms, the policies, the regulations, the incentives, the rewards, the punishments we put in place - just like people really. So we get the environment we deserve when we establish these institutional arrangements.

We need to talk about 'Using land managers to care for country' because:

- We ignore that farmers have about \$200 billion invested in agricultural assets
- We ignore that farmers spend about \$25 billion a year on activities that affect land, and
- We ignore that about 350,000 people work the land in some way or the other.

We ignore these things in so many ways.

- By not placing emphasis on the effectiveness of the total investment-public and private
- By using short term funding to address long term issues

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- By a dogmatic belief in the effectiveness and efficiency of remotely controlled competitive funding, ignoring the inevitability of government failure—instance the great waste in the environmental management systems (EMS) programs where the cost of these programs per certified EMS is somewhere between \$50,000 and \$100,000
- By giving the impression that environmental management is achieved by such as NHT, NAP and now CFC (Caring for Country), and that we can stuff about with organisations, funding and people and not affect the effectiveness of these marginal yet potentially important investments
- By not involving individual land managers in setting goals and targets for their properties
- By reductionist programs and by failures to align market and other drivers.

I could go on and on, but let me get closer to home.

Learning through experience

In many ways I am the median beef farmer - aged over 60, investment over \$1 million, most net household income from non-agricultural sources, son and daughter not returning to the farm, bouts of clinical depression etc.

But land managers are a varied lot and in one regard I'm not median; that is I have been involved as the primary land manager since the mid 1970s, some 30 years, about double the national average.

And I have been fortunate in having had lessons from other experiences: as a student of ecology and creativity; as a biochemist, as an agricultural and environmental contract researcher, as a trade and political adviser and as an abattoir and research corporation director.

So I've been force fed with lessons from all sorts of places and people and maybe some have stuck.

However, I want to focus today on the lessons my partner and I have had as land managers over the past decade, and in particular on those that have to do with the interface between us as land managers and public programs to improve environmental outcomes.

Beliefs and values

In the early 1990s we fenced off a major and badly eroded gully feeding into one of the three northern tributaries of the Clarence River in NSW. There have been major conservation benefits (erosion control; improved water quality; habitat for bettongs etc) and significant cattle management benefits.

In the mid 1990s we got a Bush Care grant to extend this fencing. We signed a comprehensive and very detailed contract. The responsible officer was retrenched soon after we signed the contract and there has been no monitoring or audit of

expenditure. As there was no water flow into the alternative watering dams we did not exclude cattle until about four years after the date specified in the contract. Nevertheless there have been major benefits in erosion control, water quality, platypus habitat, recreational value and cattle management.

All of these fences were affected by a flood in January 2008 and we have just finished repairs to make them stockproof.

Lesson

Beliefs and values are important. Good things can happen just because we want them - we don't always have to do an economic benefit cost analysis, we don't always have to have public investment to cover externalities, and when the landholder wants to do it the cost of accountability is greatly reduced.

Landholder engagement

Eucalyptus regrowth is a major problem for us. However, in the late 1990s and more recently we were invited to apply for funding to plant native trees. We did so and planted trees around the house. These trees have no conservation value.

In 2007 we invited our catchment management authority (CMA) to work with us to jointly develop a timber management plan. The invitation was declined as funds for that sort of activity were not available. Although I indicated we did not seek funding support the offer was again declined.

Lesson

There are substantial risks in establishing goals and targets independent of the responsible and informed land manager. Support agencies need the personnel and processes to respond to opportunities presented by landholders.

Capacity building

In 2006 I signed up for a series of 8 one-day property planning workshops, funded by our CMA except for a \$12.50 cost per landholder/workshop. Because of travel commitments I was not able to attend the workshops. However, neighbours inform me the workshops were interesting but that they have not lead to practice change.

Early in 2008 I attended a two day EMS workshop totally funded by our CMA. The workshop process did not lead to any insights. There is no auditing to provide a base for recognition. It is unlikely there will be any ongoing activity.

Lesson

Processes to improve motivation and sustained activity and hence environmental outcomes need to be well designed and supported.

Integrating objectives

Just recently we tendered for support to manage one sixth the area of our farm solely for conservation purposes for the next 25 years. I estimate the costs of fencing and weed control and the loss of production to be about five times our tender price. The cost is largely due to the proposed restrictions on cattle grazing (limited to 15 days/year). I am not aware of any scientific evidence or practical experience to support such a grazing regime. Had we be able to negotiate a different conservation-

grazing balance or one governed by outcomes we would have tendered for an agreement covering a greater area.

Lesson

Negotiated partnerships can lead to big outcomes from small incentives but getting the partnership defined requires considerable skill and technical input.

Ignoring the elephants

None of the above has addressed the big issue, and that is how our grazing and weed management affects environmental outcomes across the whole property. Additionally while regional priorities affect fund allocations there has been no attempt to redress problems arising from off-site effects.

Lesson

Public expenditure has not been focused enough on leveraging private investment to efficiently deliver outcomes relevant at both the property and local/regional levels. The interface between us as land managers and public programs has been piecemeal and reductionist. There is a great need and a great opportunity to do it better.

The message

The ecological and policy situation is complex.

But the message is simple.

- respect the complexity
- acknowledge the uncertainty
- work with the elephants - the land managers, their investments, their knowledge, their longevity

And that is what we are doing with the Australian Landcare Management System (ALMS).

ALMS – built on solid foundations

We established the not-for-profit ALMS Group in 2003 to assist land managers improve environmental outcomes in ways that recognise their achievements and those of their support organisations.

The foundations for what we do include:

- recognition that improving environmental outcomes is primarily about managing the environmental impacts of land managers
- accepting that lack of motivation of land managers is the primary constraint to improving environmental outcomes.
- knowing that increasing motivation requires a system for recognising improving environmental management

- ensuring that the recognition system is credible, ecologically sound, relevant to many sources of recognition, practical and cost effective.

ALMS – where we are now

There is nothing we can't do better. However, we are progressing.

By the end of June this year we will have about 170 land managers each with a certified ALMS land management plan.

We have some useful tools—the Australian EMS Manual, the *myEMS* software, an effective training process, accredited trainers and auditors, a documented auditing process, gate signs, web site, guides of various types etc.

Importantly we continue to develop partnerships with relevant organisations, not least with North East CMA, and with other CMAs and industry bodies. We are building global agribusiness links - through our Green Dollar Forum last year and now through the Sustainable Agricultural Initiative (SAI).

We are demonstrating the power of ALMS as a platform upon which to bolt more specific requirements - for eco labelling, for ethical production, for carbon accounting, to help meet regional priorities etc.

None of this would be happening without you as participating land holders and without the support provided by Elders.

ALMS – where we need to be in 2020

In 2020 ALMS will be established as the premium voluntary Australian land management certification system for use across both private and public lands.

The Board of the ALMS Group will be restructured to reflect its extensive land holder membership base and its partnerships with regional and industry bodies.

Regional and industry bodies will benefit from and hence assist ALMS landholder members with implementation of their action plans.

ALMS landholder members will be receiving preferential treatment in Australia and overseas food and fibre markets and in the provision of eco-services.

ALMS landholder members will own an extensive environmental data base including clear evidence of improving environmental outcomes.

Importantly ALMS members will be a grassroots support network for land managers who want to do it better—and be rewarded for doing so.