

Grass Clippings

Native grasslands and grassy woodlands newsletter

May 2000

Number 10

Grass Clippings is an occasional newsletter to provide brief updates on initiatives and activities aimed at conserving and managing grassy ecosystems.

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Grassland Wins 1. Central Creek Grassland

The Central Creek Grassland at Broadmeadows finally has a secure future. After six years of negotiations between NRE, the Urban Land Corporation, City of Darebin, Merri Creek Management Committee and private landowners, nearly 9 ha of the State Significant grassland will become a conservation reserve. A committee of management will be set up to manage the site. The remaining parts of the 13 ha site are mostly weedy and degraded, and will be developed for housing. Seed collection and relocation will be investigated for the few high quality areas that will be lost.

Grassland Wins 2. Epsom Racecourse

Congratulations to the City of Kingston, which has conserved 7 ha of FFG-listed Herb-rich Plains Grassy Wetland in the middle of the old Epsom racecourse.

Grassland management activities

Western Basalt Plains:

Management works are well underway at the new Craigieburn Grassland Reserve, north of Melbourne.

- Traplines for the endangered Grassland Earless Dragon are being re-opened.
- A student is mapping the extent of the nationally vulnerable *Carex tasmanica* (Curly Sedge). Spiny Rush infestations are also being mapped.
- PV and NRE are looking at strategic fencing of knolls and other significant areas.

- Weed control focus is on Serrated Tussock, Chilean Needle-grass, and gorse as a fox refuge.

Most of the Central Creek Grassland was burnt in March. The SW corner of the Derrimut Grassland Reserve was also burnt, and half of the Laverton North Grassland Reserve (another middle of the night job, to avoid problems with smoke and traffic on the Princes Highway).

The southern side of the Little River rail reserve between Melbourne and Geelong was fenced by the company contracted to manage many of the state's privatised rail lines. Unfortunately previous railway works had already damaged the site. This is particularly galling to those from LaTrobe University, NRE, VNPA and local conservation groups who have put so much effort into protecting these sites.

Northern Plains:

In early April, the Hunter rail reserve and a portion of the adjacent flora reserve was burnt by CFA Hunter.

In late April three burns totalling 131 ha were achieved at Terrick Terrick National Park. On 15 April surveys found a male Plains-wanderer with 4 young, and a female. Seven Curl Snakes were also spotted. Congratulations to the Park Ranger, Mark Tscharke, who has received a Parks Victoria outstanding individual achievement award for his efforts in monitoring and managing the Park.

Gippsland Plains

Local volunteers have received a Botanic Guardians grant to manage and restore a remnant grassland on the rail line west of Traralgon.

Striped Legless Lizard rescues

For the past twelve months on-site salvage works for the Striped Legless Lizard have been underway at the former Albion Explosives site. Operating under a protocol developed with NRE and the Striped Legless Lizard Working Group, Biosis Research has been salvaging lizards from sites about to undergo contamination remediation works and development. The Working Group reports that since the salvage protocols have been in place, 52 lizards have been salvaged and added to the collection at Melbourne Zoo. This represents a 77% survival rate of individuals located by the salvage process.

Research report

Although the Grassy Ecosystem Reference Group has now mostly wound up, the research projects from the last round of GERG funding are still proceeding. The first report from the final round of projects has just been received. *Management of Introduced*

Molluscs and Mites by IPM Technologies, has brought to light some interesting information. The report notes population densities of exotic pest slugs were low in burnt native grasslands compared to unburnt grasslands and exotic pastures. Populations of Red-legged Earth-mite were highest in pastures and capeweed, and lowest in unburnt native grassland sites. The practice of ploughing firebreaks along fencelines encourages Red-legged Earth-mites.

Infrastructure and utilities - updates

F2 freeway update

The Government is presently reviewing the panel report on the F2 freeway. A working party has been established to examine possible variations to route options put forward by VicRoads. There will be further consultation with local governments and the general community, to achieve better outcomes for native grasslands and other ecosystems and land use in the area.

Fibre optic cable

Powertel, an international telecommunications company, is planning to lay a fibre optic cable between Melbourne and Sydney along the main rail line. NRE is concerned about possible impacts on threatened native species and communities along the line. The route has been approved, and NRE is continuing to negotiate with Powertel on construction methods and any possible impacts.

Grants

WWF/NHT Grassy Ecosystems Grant

The meeting of the National Assessment Panel was held on 9-10 March 2000, and attended by government and non-government representatives from Victoria, NSW, SA, Tasmania and ACT.

Sixty-one projects were submitted – one from ACT, 14 from NSW, 12 from SA, one from Tasmania and 33 from Victoria. The Panel assessed the merits of the applications, but also discussed the selection criteria, refinements to the assessment process, how to improve the quality and number of applications, and priorities and timing for the next round.

The Panel's recommendations have been submitted to the Federal Environment Minister, Senator Hill. It is expected that successful grants will be announced around the end of May. A detailed report of the grant, including the timetable for the next round, will be provided as an extra *Grass Clippings* supplement.

Merri Creek Management Committee success

Congratulations to the Merri Creek Management Committee, who received Parks Victoria Agency Grants for three significant habitat projects along the Merri Creek north of Melbourne. The grants are "Re-establishing Rare Species – Restoring Western Basalt Plains Grasslands of the Merri Catchment" (\$74,100), "Restoring wetland communities to the Merri Creek" (\$116,000) and "Sun and Shade: Returning Butterflies and Ferns to the Merri Creek" (\$62,500). Details are in the Friends of the Merri

Creek Newsletter, February-May 2000, ph (03) 9380 8199, www.vicnet.net.au/~fomc

Conservation Alliance grant applications

The Conservation Alliance is a non-profit environmental organisation with a membership consisting of companies in the outdoor industry which derive more than fifty per cent of their income from self-propelled adventure activities and which are committed to supporting the protection of the environment.

Each company commits itself to contributing 0.1 per cent of its turnover to a fund to support environmental projects, with a minimum donation of \$1,000 and a maximum donation of \$10,000.

The funds are used to assist projects, which meet the objects of the Conservation Alliance which are:

- To support campaigns, projects and organisations working for the protection or proper management of natural resources and environment within Australia, New Zealand and the Asia Pacific region.
- To ensure the protection of wilderness, natural areas, and biodiversity from threatening processes.
- To ensure the good management of natural areas to maintain their environmental values and opportunities for low impact self-reliant activities.

This year the amount of funds available for grants is substantially larger than in past years due to a number of new member companies joining.

The deadline for Conservation Alliance grant applications is July 1 - only two months away.

Before lodging an application please note:

- Details of the criteria for grants, lists of past grants made and the application form are all available on the Conservation Alliance website at <http://www.hydra.org.au/ca/>
- All grant applications must be on the proforma available on the web site. Please do not send any other material of any type.
- Please read the grant criteria closely. Grants that fall outside the criteria don't get to first base;
- If you are uncertain, drop us a line (e-mail preferred) to clarify what is meant by the criteria;
- We do not accept late applications - the deadline is the deadline;
- Grant decisions will be finalised in early Oct 2000;
- Organisations that have not met their obligations for reporting on past grants from the Conservation Alliance are not eligible for additional grants.

Contact details for the Conservation Alliance is:
P.O. Box 227 Bangalow, NSW 2479 Australia
Phone: (02) 6687 2425 Fax: (02) 6687 2413

Please pass on this message to as many organisations as possible (not just grassy ones):

- environment groups;
- outdoor recreational groups undertaking environmental protection and awareness activities;

- other groups you think might be doing work that fits within the aims of the Conservation Alliance.

From Bob Burton,
Grants Committee, The Conservation Alliance.
PO Box 157, O'Connor ACT 2602
Ph/Fax 02 6247 4072 email bburton@hydra.org.au

Grassland Communication Network

This informal group consists of representatives from NRE, Parks Victoria, Melbourne Zoo, Victoria's Open Range Zoo at Werribee, Victoria University and Merri Creek Management Committee. The Network aims to maintain an up to date list of all available education and information sources, including books, posters, brochures, videos, electronic resources, people, events, display gardens etc. It will keep track of available resources to ensure new projects aren't "re-inventing the wheel" and are concentrated on the right target audience. Among the terrific resources recently produced is a superb video entitled "Native Grasslands of the Victorian Riverina". Copies are available from the NRE Bendigo office.

The Network is also creating a calendar of grassy ecosystem events throughout the year. If you know of or are planning any events during the year, please contact Vanessa.

Corangamite Native Grasslands Revegetation Project

Kim Barker is the new Project Officer for the Corangamite Native Grasslands Revegetation Project. The project covers the Corangamite area, focussing initially on the Leigh district. The project has a steering committee, consisting of representatives from Landcare, NRE, Greening Australia, and local government.

Since the start of the year, Kim has been focussing on revegetation works, visiting private landowners, developing a tool kit for best practice management, and setting up display sites for people to visit and get to know their native grasses.

Conference reports

Report on the first conference of the Stipa Native Grasses Association - "**Better Pastures, Naturally**", in Mudgee, NSW, 16-17 March 2000.

Over 200 participants heard a variety of excellent farmer and specialist speakers presented papers in three sessions: 'Our Versatile Native Pastures', 'Better Pastures Naturally' and 'Native Grasses in Practice'.

That agriculture can be not only sustainable but also restorative was an exciting concept propounded by Christine Jones from the Department of Land and Water Conservation. Land managers can use grazing to stimulate native grassland species to grow vigorously and develop healthy root systems, which in turn stimulate biological activity, water retention and infiltration.

Speakers gave encouraging examples from their own property of how changes to their land management strategies have improved their environment and production, and reduced costs. Tim Wright introduced planned cell grazing in 1993. The effects were monitored and it was found that desirable native perennial grasses and native legumes such as *Glycine* and *Desmodium* were enhanced. Relatively rare grassland components such as purple donkey orchids and chocolate and vanilla lilies were observed in the cell grazed paddocks, and the grazing-sensitive perennial *Capillipedium* (scented-top grass) increased markedly.

Other presenters discussed the place native grasses can have in other industries such as mine rehabilitation, salinity control, organic farming, pasture cropping and commercial seed production. Harvesting and selling native seed is now a commercial operation and we were shown a number of seed harvesting and sowing machines that had been developed.

Darryl Cluff and Colin Seis from STIPA spoke about pasture cropping which involves direct drilling cereal crops into existing pastures. Unploughed paddocks can be cropped in winter and grazed in summer. This gives an additional income from the crops while retaining the native grasses and it was even thought that this system encouraged natives such as *Microlaena*, *Glycine* and *Desmodium*.

Day two of the conference was spent on the Seis's property "Winona", east of Gulgong, NSW. Here we saw the results of pulse grazing on the property, where 1500 merinos were moved around 15 paddock in a single mob grazing for about 5 days on each paddock. The Seis's crop into pastures and it was interesting to see a paddock that had been cropped looked little different to an uncropped pasture.

In order to protect and regenerate native grasslands we need to find ways of combining production and conservation outcomes over the large tracts of agricultural land in Australia. This conference gave us some strategies to begin to do this.

Report on the "**Is A Fence Enough?**" Grassy Woodland Management Workshop, Cumnock, 24 March 2000. By Bill Semple, DLWC, PO Box 53, Orange 2800.

Over 100 farmers, extension officers and woodland/grassland ecologists exchanged ideas on managing grassy woodlands at a workshop in Cumnock in March. The Question/Answer session and field trip highlighted the need to do more than just put a fence around a woodland remnant. For example, native understorey plants need to produce seed but they also need gaps in which to germinate and establish. This means that vegetative litter levels need to be reduced at regular intervals. Both burning and grazing can do this but there was no general agreement about which was best. Speakers at the workshop emphasised that natural "patchiness" in woodland remnants needs to be maintained - particularly for the survival of small animals. Try not to burn or graze the whole area at any one time.

The workshop was introduced by presentations of past, present and future scenarios. Local landholder and session chairman, Geoff Tonkin, put forward a view of future homogenised, globalised, "mcdonaldised" landscapes where the same plant species - mostly weeds - occur everywhere. Dr Kevin Theile then took the audience into the past with a selection of slides, which showed what the grassy woodlands once looked like - spring wildflower shows to rival those of WA. Areas with such characteristics are now very rare. Dr David Goldney brought the discussion back to the present by outlining what is happening to the health and distribution of woodlands in the Central West of NSW. Many are doomed unless positive action is taken now. Drs Ian Lunt and Donna Windsor introduced strategies for managing woodlands in "good" and "poor" condition. These strategies were subsequently taken up and expanded in the innovative Question/Answer session (where the whole audience acted as an expert panel for questions submitted earlier in the day) and the field trip.

Continuous grazing - even at low stocking rates - was considered inappropriate for woodland management, as uncommon plants are likely to be selectively grazed. Short periods of high intensity grazing can be used for controlling weeds as well as for incorporating litter. However, grazing was not recommended for pristine sites with a history of nil or very infrequent grazing. Most importantly, keep records - even if only photographs - of what management regime was applied. We still have a lot to learn about managing grassy woodlands.

The overall message was there's no one "right" way to manage these areas. If encouraging native birds is your aim, then planting shrubs may be appropriate even if they weren't part of the original woodland. Ideally, such plantings would be restricted to a "buffer area" around or on one side of the woodland. Similarly, excessive tree regeneration in a remnant could be controlled if your aim was to mimic the original woodland. But when viewed from the perspective of a relatively treeless landscape, such trees would probably be retained for their potential benefits as habitat and for controlling groundwater.

For most landholders the first step in conserving woodlands will be to fence them so that they can be managed separately from surrounding land. Financial assistance for doing this is available from the sponsors of the workshop: Greening Australia, Bushcare, Community Solutions "Taking Action Now" project, National Parks & Wildlife Service's "Grassy Box Woodlands Conservation Management Network" and the Department of Land and Water Conservation.

New Conference

11th Australian Rangeland Conference: "**Past Achievements, Future Challenges**". Broken Hill 21-24 August, 2000

The conference will reflect on the century of land administration in the arid and semi-arid rangelands of western New South Wales 100 years after the Royal

Commission into the condition of the Crown Tenants of the Western Division.

The **program** will be structured around the dominant issues facing landholders and government involved in the use and administration of rangeland resources since 1860 through to the new millennium.

Conference participants will have a choice of mid conference **tours** featuring some of the issues of land management in the Broken Hill district, including rangeland and native animal research at Fowlers Gap field station. Other tours feature traditional ownership and management programs at Mutawintli National Park, and alternative sheep enterprises and irrigated horticulture in the Menindee district.

The Australian Rangeland Society will offer the first 20 land managers to register for the conference a 50% **discount** in registration fees, slashing the registration cost from \$370 to \$185.

Registration forms are available from Intercomm Event Coordination, 08-8645-0199 (fax: 08-8644-1775, email: nicolson@w130.aone.net.au). Forms are also available from NSW Agriculture and NSW Department of Land and Water Conservation offices in Broken Hill.

Weeds of National Significance

During this year, draft strategies for tackling each of Australia's 20 'Weeds of National Significance' (WONS) are being progressively released for public comment.

The inaugural list of Weeds of National Significance was announced on 1st June 1999. It is based on the top 20 weeds, as endorsed by the Agricultural and Resource Management Council of Australia and New Zealand (ARMCANZ), Australia and New Zealand Environment and Conservation Council (ANZECC) and Forestry Ministers.

Draft National Strategies for WONS released so far include those for Prickly Acacia, Rubber Vine, Mesquite, Parkinsonia, Parthenium Weed, Alligator Weed, Blackberry, and of particular interest to southern grassland enthusiasts, Chilean Needle-grass (*Nassella neesiana*) and Serrated Tussock (*Nassella trichotoma*).

As they are released, the Strategies are available at: <http://www.weeds.org.au> (in PDF format). Closing dates for comment for each strategy are listed on the web pages. Comments for the strategies for the Nassellas have closed, but the strategies themselves can still be viewed.

For more information on the draft national strategies contact John Thorp 03-6344-9657 (fax: 03-6343-1877, email: jthorp@weeds.org.au).

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