

# Grass Clippings

Native grasslands and grassy woodlands newsletter

March 2000

Number 9

*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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## People movements

Tim Barlow has resigned from the position as Bushcare Grassy Ecosystems Networker. Thanks heaps Tim for all the great work you did - you'll be sadly missed. Tim is still very active in the field though, so expect to see him about.

Helen Ryan, previously employed by NRE for 2 years as a TOPCROP extension officer, has replaced Tim. She has completed a B.Sc. with Honours in Botany at the University of Queensland, investigating Mitchell grassland restoration.

## New reserves

In August 1999 Ted and Sandra Cockram handed part of their Mt Ridley property over to the Government as a grassy woodland reserve. Mt Ridley contains some of the best Red Gum grassy woodland in the region.

This was quickly followed by the launch of the 400 ha Craigieburn Grassland Conservation Reserve, which was purchased with State and Federal funding. This is one of the best grasslands in Victoria. It supports 242 species of native plants, including 3 of National significance, 10 of State significance and 112 of regional significance, and large areas of three of the most threatened communities in Victoria, Western Basalt Plains Grassland, Stony Knoll Grassland and Grassy Wetland. Fauna includes 2 species of National Significance (Plains-wanderer and Striped Legless Lizard), 3 of State significance (Black Falcon,

Red-chested Button-quail and Freshwater Blackfish) and 24 species of regional significance.

## Conference - "Balancing Conservation and Production in Grassy Landscapes"

The Proceedings of the Bushcare Conference: Balancing Conservation and Production in Grassy Landscapes, held in Clare S.A. from 19-21 August 1999, are now available. If you would like to receive a copy free of charge please contact Environment Australia's Community Information Unit on freecall 1800 803 772 or email [ciu@ea.gov.au](mailto:ciu@ea.gov.au)

Please note that the conference proceedings will automatically be posted to those involved in the conference, the ANZECC Working Group on Nature Conservation on Private Land members, and anyone who has already contacted Environment Australia or Intercomm Event Coordination to request their name be placed on the distribution list.

The conference aimed to explore the value and benefits of grassy landscapes for conservation and sustainable production. The conference was extremely well attended and well received - many people claimed it was the best conference they'd ever attended. It provided ideas and proposed solutions to the usual stories of ongoing losses.

For the remnants of the original ecosystems to survive, it is imperative that nature conservation becomes a normal part of farming operations. It is also argued that, for farming itself to survive, production objectives need to be more fully integrated with nature conservation.

The conference was divided into seven sessions, each of which contained four or five speakers invited to present a given topic relevant to their area of expertise. In the first session, "Setting the Scene", Biz and Lindsay Nicolson present their views on what it means to be 'on the land', in their case the Northern Midlands of Tasmania. Denis Saunders then explained what biodiversity really means as a term, and for the maintenance of essential, life-supporting ecological processes.

The second session included presentations from farmers from various regions across Southeastern Australia, each giving their own perspective on balancing conservation and production. As Cynthia Dunbabin states 'it's hard to be green if you're in the red'. An issue of ubiquitous concern was the socially crippling exodus of young people from rural communities.

Despite the fragmentation and impoverishment of natural ecosystems, the biodiversity of Grassy Landscapes still supports an array of biological treasures, including the mysterious sex-life of the Pale Sun Moth and the cryptic habits of our bat fauna. Conservation strategies, whether for a single species such as the Plains-wanderer or an entire ecosystem such as the White Box Woodlands, reveal the importance of including socio-economic issues, and adopting a flexible approach in conservation planning.

Gaining an understanding of the socio-economics of the farm enterprise is the purpose of "The Nature of the Business" session, which explored a range of issues from creating marketing advantages, to the strategic delivery of conservation incentives. The "Looking Back: Moving Forward" session considered the potential importance of 'evolutionarily-acquired' attitudes to grassy landscapes, and the on-going relationships of Indigenous Australians with this land. Both the long-past and most recent experiences will help determine our abilities to better integrate conservation and production.

The two final sessions were both pragmatic and profound. "Managing Native Pastures" examined concepts relating to knowing your plants and utilising 'ecological windows' to achieve a range of objectives, from manipulating pasture composition through to non-destructive cropping of degraded native grasslands. "A Broader Look at Grassy Landscapes" includes consideration of the \$20 billion worth of trees standing in the grassy landscape and threatened by dieback. Limiting pasture intensification to about 30% of any one property could potentially rectify this and maintain sufficient patchiness in the landscape to provide for the majority of plant and animal habitat needs. Ultimately though, we must develop a more diverse and stable agricultural system if this balance of biodiversity and production is to be achieved.

Challenges that are still to be faced are to:

- Increase areas of high priority remnant grasslands
- Increase areas of high priority remnant grasslands under secure management eg, covenants
- Need to improve management on all land tenures
- Increased community involvement in grassland conservation
- Increased knowledge about management of grassy ecosystems on farms and reserves
- Recognition and protection of grasslands in regional plans eg, CCMA and Local Government.

#### **WWF/NHT Grassy Ecosystems Grants**

In August 1999 Senator Hill, the Federal Environment Minister, announced the creation of a new grants scheme focusing solely on the conservation and management of grassy ecosystems in SE Australia. The Grassy Ecosystems Grants Partnership is an initiative of the World Wide Fund for Nature Australia and the Natural Heritage Trust Bushcare Program.

This Grant scheme aims to distribute targeted funding to achieve:

- an increase in the area of grassy ecosystems on private land protected by covenants or long term management agreements,
- an increase in the number of cooperative land management agreements with public authorities,
- an improvement in understanding and application of best practice management across a range of sites and tenures,
- increased community involvement in the management of grassy ecosystems across their range, and
- knowledge generation about the distribution and conservation status of grassy ecosystem remnants, particularly those on private land.

In this round up to \$300,000 will be distributed to a range of projects. It is anticipated that the majority of proposals approved will be less than \$5,000, a lesser number between \$5,000 and \$20,000 with a small number of larger projects up to \$50,000.

A further \$155,000 may be available for grants to landholders wishing to establish covenants or other management agreements to protect native grasslands.

Applications closed on 16 December 1999. Of the 62 applications received from Victoria, SA, NSW, ACT and Tasmania, 33 came from Victoria – so we're either very keen or very poor.

A National Assessment Panel, comprising one government and one non-government representative from each State, was established to assess applications for funding. Victorian representatives on the Panel are Vanessa Craigie of the Parks, Flora and Fauna division of NRE as the government representative and James Ross of the Victorian National Parks Association as the non-government representative. Bob Carraill, Chairperson of the Corangamite Catchment Management Authority, and previously Chair of the Grassy Ecosystem Reference Group, has also been invited to provide a farming perspective.

Assessments will be completed by 10 March 2000 when the National Assessment Panel meets in Sydney. Minister Hill will make announcements of successful grants soon after this date.

For further information on the grants scheme contact Vanessa Craigie, or Pip Walsh at WWF (02) 9281 5515.

#### **Rail reassessment**

During spring of 1999, NRE staff began re-assessing all rail lines in the State. With the privatisation of the rail system, the rail line managers needed to know the current condition of significant sites along rail lines, and the exact locations. Since the late 1980s, a number of sites had been damaged or destroyed, and new ones had been discovered, so there was an urgent need to update the information. Rail lines in the Melbourne and Geelong areas, up through Bendigo and the northwest to Mildura were re-surveyed. As is so often the case, there was good news and bad news – a number of sites had been

destroyed and many damaged, but fewer than perhaps expected. Some sites we thought were long destroyed turned out to be reasonably undamaged. However all are crying out for urgent basic management – burning and selective weed control.

Hopefully surveys will be nearly completed in spring 2000, with the assistance of VicTrack.

#### **Railway damage**

The urgent need for railway management was highlighted by damage to some highly significant sites in August-September 1999. Sites of State significance along the Geelong - Hamilton and Geelong - Melbourne railway lines were damaged by truck and bulldozer movements associated with rail maintenance works by the new private contractors. At least one fenced and signposted site was damaged, and 17 Large Groundsel (*Senecio macrocarpus*) plants, listed as threatened under the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act, were destroyed. NRE and the rail managers are now working together to avoid any future damage, and are planning training courses for all maintenance contractors.

#### **Roadside damage**

On a similarly grim note, there was extensive damage to high quality roadsides in Southwest Victoria in early summer.

The threat of summer fires, and reduced manpower in rural areas, has led to the replacement of regular burning by the catastrophic use of broadscale herbicide sprays along these roadsides. Even sites with signposts declaring "Significant Native Vegetation" have been destroyed.

Years of study and observation have shown that intact native grassland vegetation is generally low growing, sparse and open, mostly dominated by fire-tolerant grasses, herbs and low shrubs. These native grasslands and herbfields are often green in summer and, given frequent burning, carry a light fuel load and present a relatively small fire risk. However, when destroyed by herbicide spraying or ploughing, tall, dense exotic weeds quickly replace the native vegetation. These are all spring-growing plants, that dry off rapidly in summer to leave a strip of dry, highly flammable fuel with seed heads that catch fire and take flight on the wind to carry the fire to neighbouring land.

Furthermore, relatively undisturbed native vegetation is highly resistant to weed invasion. Only when the ground is broken up and the native plants killed or disturbed do introduced weeds really take off. So when they are destroying the natives, the roadside managers are wiping out their allies and locking themselves into an eternal cycle of fire threat, ploughing and herbicide use.

Across the Southwest, important roadsides have been destroyed in the Shires of Golden Plains, Surf Coast, Colac, Corangamite and Southern Grampians. Roadsides include parts of the Hamilton Highway, Glenelg Highway, Shelford-Cressy Road, Berrybank-

Werneth Road, Cressy-Foxhow Road, Urches Road, Geggies Road, to name but a few.

This native vegetation is protected under the FFG Act, and *anyone* who kills or disturbs it without a permit is breaking the law – no person or organisation is exempt.

On a more positive note Steve McDougall (NRE, Colac) has spoken to all VicRoads Environmental Officers about the need to implement practices to maintain biodiversity.

#### **Planning Schemes**

The Corangamite Shire Planning Scheme has been released and the Colac-Otway and Surf Coast Shires are in the public consultation phase. All of these plans have maps with overlays of areas of conservation value. This will hopefully ensure Shire planners are better aware of what is there, and that NRE can become involved where necessary.

#### **Significant Sites Documentation Project**

As part of this project, NRE has been developing a computer program to provide management advice. This "decision support system" aims to provide **general** guidelines on how to manage native grasslands. The program is close to completion and will be available for selected trials in the next month or so.

#### **Grasslands Extension Officer, Colac**

NRE has appointed Dugald Buchanan as the Grasslands Extension Officer for the Corangamite region. Dugald's role is to work with landowner to increase their skills in identifying and managing native grasses and invasive weeds. He is also involved in seed collection and revegetation trials. For example he is working on a one ha site looking at ways to replace serrated tussock with kangaroo grass.

#### **Coming Events**

##### **Is a fence enough? A workshop on managing your grassy woodlands.**

After you've fenced a grassy woodland remnant what do you do next? This issue will be addressed at a two day workshop on 23 March and 24 March. The first day, at Orange NSW, is for the scientists and a few extension people. The second day, at Cumnock, is for everyone, particularly landholders, to discuss their own experiences. Limited accommodation will be available at the Cumnock pub on the evening of the 23rd for some "serious networking". For further details on either or both workshops, please contact Bill Semple, Dept Land & Water Conservation, 02 6361 7557 bsemple@dlwc.nsw.gov.au or Mollie Whitehorn (Community Solutions) (02) 63 677 226

**Better Pastures Naturally** Stipa Inaugural Grasslands Conference 16-17<sup>th</sup> March. Mudgee, NSW. Phone Mike Byron (02) 6374 2005.

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