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John Gavin

John.gavin@capeyorknrm.com.au

Rangelands Policy Paper

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Introduction

Current activities continue to drain the resources from the Outback, transferring the wealth to the coast, exchanging limited economic benefit for diminished environmental and social capital. Time and again capital is diminished and the people and environment are left to make do with resources that would be considered absurdly inadequate in eastern Australia. In return for providing national prosperity, the Outback and its people receive little reward. The future of the Outback is at risk through the impacts of historical and current management practices. This is exacerbated by current social policies and economic impacts, combined with the significant future pressures for access to water, minerals and other resources.

Despite the vast differences in social, environmental and economic terms, we choose to take policy and programs designed for the highly populated east coast of Australia and attempt to apply them in the Outback. This is unsurprising when you consider that of the 150 members of the Federal House of Representatives, only 13 represent Outback Australia.

An acceptance and understanding of the drivers of the Outback system will not only enable but is critical to the successful development and implementation of policy and programs.

Discussion.

There is increasing interest and discussion regarding the development of a coordinated national approach to the future of the Outback. To fully address the issues facing Outback Australia, a multi-disciplinary approach to developing practical and long lasting impacts is essential.

Outback Governance

There is a critical need for a different governance structure to be implemented for the Outback. This requires a structure that has the authority to focus solely on Outback Australia, to provide regional coordination and address the current imbalance at a cross jurisdictional level with implementation carried out at the regional or local level.

Stafford Smith and Cribb (2009) argue the case for the Outback voice to be recognised, through an Outback Commission. This provides a governance structure that is able to develop programs and policy uniquely tailored for the conditions in which they will operate. It will provide for effective community engagement and a model for decentralised governance that will be able to capitalise on the ability and drive for innovation across the Outback. It can do this within the context of supporting the broader Australian, State and Territory Government directions, ensuring more effective and efficient delivery. The commission would be charged with developing the strategic long term vision for Outback Australia, including infrastructure, health, education, economic and environmental management outcomes, and advocating for the requisite resources and policies needed to achieve the agreed future.

The formation of an Outback Commission will take the Outback out of the backyards of the states and put it in the forefront of a cross border, locally driven governance model.

Outback Resourcing

The need to stimulate investment in parts of Outback Australia has been recognised by many different governments through time. Developing the North has been on the national agenda for over a century, but the desire and political will to achieve development has been limited by short political timeframes and the minimal political repercussions of the ebbs and flows of policies and programs as they cyclically overwhelm and retreat across the social and biophysical landscape of the Outback.

This sporadic development has been hampered by a lack of resources and the opportunity exists to overcome this through the establishment of a fund to encourage investment in the infrastructure, people and economy of the Outback. The desire to see improved outcomes and create a legacy is widely expressed and individual approaches are underway. *Generation One* is an example where some of Australia's most successful mining, media and transport businesses contribute wealth to drive change across the Outback and elsewhere. The coordinated delivery of resources from individual businesses and government programs can lead to increased and broader outcomes addressing the strategic underlying needs of Outback Australia.

The creation of an Outback fund will drive the opportunity for existing industries and governments to create a legacy for the future. This is an opportunity to create change, increase employment and achieve significant policy advances across the national agenda for *Closing the Gap*, *Developing the North*, and *A Cleaner Environment*.

The Australian Rangelands Initiative

The productive capacity of outback agricultural industries and the economic future of the Outback is inseparably and directly linked to the condition of the natural resources. This creates challenges and more importantly, provides the unique opportunity where a well-coordinated program of activity that improves natural resource condition will inherently increase the productive potential.

The National Rangeland NRM Alliance; together with industry, agencies and communities have developed an initiative that will provide for the long term investment in the management of the natural resources of the rangelands of Australia. It will ensure national funding and coordination of programs with delivery at the regional level. This is designed to specifically improve primary productivity and the management of natural resources across the Outback. By design, it will address a range of issues of national significance including carbon sequestration, improved profitability, a turnaround in the decline of native vegetation and reduced erosion.

Conclusion

It is difficult to describe the Outback of Australia without the use of hackneyed superlatives and almost jingoistic references to the heartland or centre of Australia. This is because, by and large, the popular image of the Outback is based in truth. What is missed is an understanding of the deeper, more complex realities of the people, livelihoods and environment. The Outback is where people and places come together in a way that is unlike any other region in Australia. With coordinated local delivery, expenditure in Australia's Outback, provides substantial return on investment. The key to this is tailored, specific programs that are developed within a context cognisant of the unique challenges and drivers in the Outback. It is time to design policy and programs in the Outback and for the Outback.

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