

The *nil tenure* approach to a landscape issue (Wild Dogs)

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ABSTRACT

Wild dogs and foxes are a major problem to sheep producers in Australia. Foxes also have a major impact on native fauna throughout the Australian landscape. Historically, wild dog/fox management in many parts of Australia has been fragmented, *ad hoc* and under resourced.

The *nil tenure* approach allows local communities, in collaboration with government land managers, to cooperatively address wild dog/fox issues across all land tenures by collectively identifying the scope of the issue, the management technique required and the level of resources required.

In the Brindabella Wee Jasper wild dog/fox cooperative control plan, a working group comprising representatives of all land managers (of both private and public lands) was established in 2000. After an initial trial year in 2001 the program consistently reduced stock losses by an average of 75% per year for the following 3 years. The program has also been awarded a certificate of acknowledgment from the Australian Department of Family and Community Services for dealing with the emotional impact upon farming families suffering from wild dog attacks on sheep.

The *nil tenure* approach highlights the benefit of focussing on the ‘common problem’ rather than criticising the efforts of adjoining land managers. The implementation of this simple approach has negated over twenty years of poor relations between private and public land managers in the area. More importantly, it has had a positive impact on the emotional well-being of farmers in the area who now feel that something positive is being done to address the constant financial and emotional impact of wild dogs. Through this truly consultative process local landmangers have not only taken “ownership” of the issue but have identified and pursued the resources required to successfully implement a local solution.

The success of the trial *nil tenure* approach and the continued cooperative support of private and public land managers has led to the approval of labour and financial resources for the Brindabella Wee Jasper plan until 2010. The State Council of Rural Lands Protection Boards in NSW has adopted the *nil tenure* approach for the management of other pest species across NSW.

Introduction

The management of wild dogs (including dingoes, *Canis lupus dingo*, feral domestic dogs, *C.l.familiaris*, and their hybrids) in south east NSW has traditionally been an extremely emotive and at times political issue. The relationships between managers of private and public lands over the last two decades has varied between cautious cooperation at the peak of relations to the non productive depths of verbal abuse, suspicion and the associated frustration of ill-coordinated, under-resourced and therefore ineffective control programs.

The impact upon domestic stock by wild dogs has long been accepted as a very real encroachment upon the earning capacity of rural grazing operations (Fleming *et al.*

2001). The traditional view held by the rural industry is that of government managed lands providing large areas of refuge for pest animals to breed and impact upon adjoining private lands (English & Chapple 2002). The traditional view of public land managers has been to acknowledge the impact of wild dog attacks as sporadic financial losses of varying degree with little acknowledgment of the emotional distress endured by landholders or agency field staff. The divergence in these views has a significant impact upon the ability of land managers (of both private and public lands) to effectively and cooperatively manage this landscape issue.

A meeting of the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service South West Slopes Regional Advisory Committee and local landholders at Wee Jasper Memorial Hall on the 9th November 2000 identified the need for a local solution to the wild dog issue. Landholders identified a high level of support for a committee comprised of local land managers (of both public and private lands), the Yass Rural Lands Protection Board and its wild dog control specialist.

Method

Working group

The Brindabella and Wee Jasper Valley Wild Dog/Fox working group first met at the Wee Jasper hall on the 18th December 2000 and included representatives of local landholders, Yass RLPB, Forests NSW and NSW NPWS.

Once formed, the working group set about identifying the scale of the issue. As individuals these land managers possessed a high level of field knowledge in their individual areas of expertise. As a collective and unified working group this level of expertise and field knowledge was utilised to take ownership of the issue and identify a local solution.

*Identifying the **real** issue*

In order to identify the full impact of the wild dog issue landholders were consulted and quickly identified impacts that were not traditionally recorded. Landholders stated that whilst the economic impact of sheep lost to wild dog attacks was significant, the emotional impact from wild dog attacks was not widely acknowledged. During meetings and on an individual basis, with members of the working group, landholders highlighted the level of emotional distress which can affect a family enduring wild dog attacks upon domestic livestock. Traditionally, government agencies had acknowledged the economic impact of wild dog attacks but had little empathy for those suffering emotional distress caused by wild dog attacks. Landholders consistently identified the stress of sleepless nights waiting for the next attack once an initial kill had taken place on their or adjoining grazing properties.

Nil tenure issue mapping

Once the full impact of wild dogs was documented by the working group the *nil tenure* mapping process was implemented to identify historic stock loss areas and access routes utilised by wild dogs to reach grazing areas where stock attacks were occurring. As the working group represented all land managers across the valleys land tenure was not identified on the assessment maps. This *nil tenure* approach allowed the working group to focus upon the issue rather than land tenure. The basic identification of wild dog habitat as bushland regardless of land tenure and cleared lands as the impact zone for stock attacks provided a valuable common point of agreement with all land managers.

Control methods

The working group recommended that bait stations and trapping be utilised for strategic control with trapping used for reactive management. These control

techniques are currently considered best practice methods for the control of canids and can be utilised across all land tenures in the control area.

Nil tenure solution mapping

Field establishment of the bait stations and sign posting (1080 poison warning signs) of the areas was undertaken by the working group with assistance from additional NPWS, Forests NSW and RLPB staff. Bait stations consisted of sifted earth mounds with a star picket (metal fence post) and a numbered tag with an identification number for each bait station. The bait station locations were logged with a hand held Global Positioning System (GPS) and downloaded onto the NPWS mapping layer. This map identified all bait station locations across the Brindabella and Wee Jasper Valley. The solution/control layer (bait stations) was overlayed onto the issues layer (bushland/wild dog habitat/stock attack sites/wild dog access routes) to ensure adequate coverage of the problem areas identified by the working group.

Tenure overlay (land manager cost identification)

To identify the costs for each land manager taking part in the program the tenure layer was overlayed on the solution/control layer (bait stations). The cooperative plan was then documented with a copy provided to Yass RLPB, Forests NSW and NPWS. The provision of a cooperative plan with 9 months of trial results allowed the working group to promote the long-term benefits of funding the cooperative plan for a 3 year period.

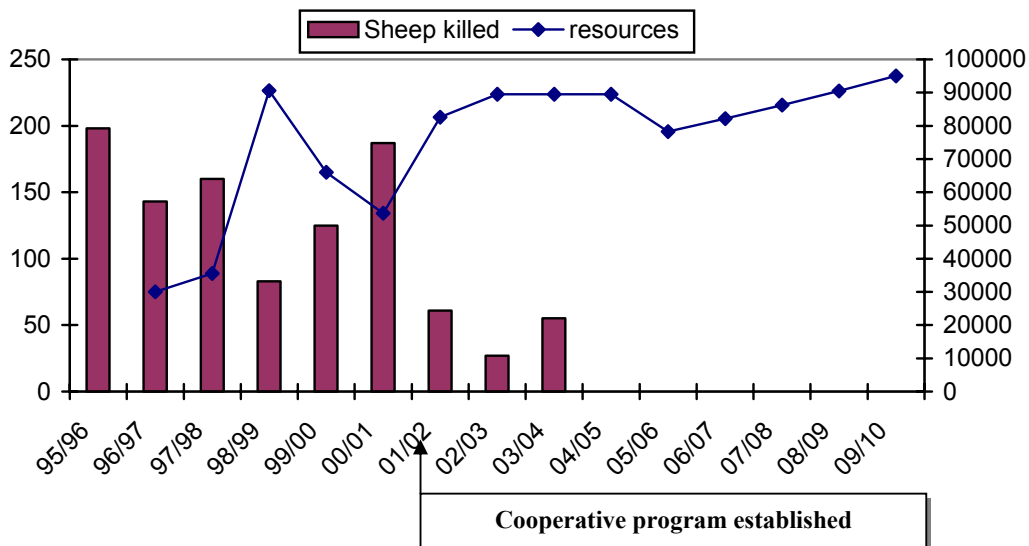
Monitoring

Traditional monitoring techniques related to the number of stock killed/maimed and the number of baits taken or wild dogs trapped was maintained to allow comparisons with historical records. To ensure adequate assessment of the success of the program a monitoring system was established in consultation with CSIRO. Sand plots were used to identify the tracks of ground dwelling mammals on set transects as an additional monitoring tool.

Results

After an initial trial year in 2001 the program consistently reduced stock losses by an average of 75% per year for the following 3 years. The increase in resources for the corresponding period is shown in the table below. The table also identifies the correlation between increased resources and associated decrease in stock losses. A stable level of resources will now be provided until 2010.

Table 1. Stock losses and financial resources committed 1996 – 2010 (Source: Yass RLPB)



Discussion

Implementation of the Brindabella and Wee Jasper wild dog/fox control plan has clearly identified the value of a *nil tenure* working group approach when addressing landscape issues such as wild dog management. A consistent reduction in stock losses along with a notable improvement in working relations between public and private land managers has ensured the commitment of resources for the program until 2010 giving landholders and wild dog control specialists long term-security. This long term funding commitment now provides the working group with a unique opportunity to investigate and trial innovative wild dog and fox control techniques.

Acknowledgments

- To the landholders of Brindabella and Wee Jasper whose commitment to finding a cooperative solution to the valleys wild dog issue is matched only by their positive and patient attitude to the successful implementation of the plan.
- To the members of the Brindabella and Wee Jasper Valleys Wild Dog/Fox Working Group whose efforts ensured the objectives of the plan made it from the Wee Jasper Hall to the bushland interface where the work was needed.

Brindabella Wee Jasper cooperative wild dog/fox working group

Chairman: Peter Southwell (Director Yass RLPB, landholder, NPWS advisory committee)

Treasurer: Kim Turner (Manager Yass RLPB)

Secretary: Rob Hunt (Ranger NPWS)

Members: Kevin Baker (Managing Ranger Yass RLPB)

Tim Cathles (landholder Wee Jasper Valley, NPWS advisory committee)

Joe Corby (Ranger Forests NSW)

Noeline Franklin (Director Yass RLPB, landholder Brindabella Valley)

David Jenkins (Australian National University/Australian Hydatid Control & Epidemiology Program)

Bill Morris (Wild Dog control specialist Yass RLPB)

Jason Vincent (Forester Forests NSW)

Andrew McDougall (Wild Dog control specialist Yass RLPB)

Mick Lenon (Ranger Yass RLPB)

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