

## **Session 7: Case Studies in Grassland Conservation (I): Balancing Traditional Uses and Conservation in TSRs**

Winston Phillips

### **Introduction**

This presentation examines the experience of Rural Lands Protection Boards (RLPBs) in managing grazing and other uses of Travelling Stock Reserves (TSRs) in harmony with native grassland and other conservation issues. It focuses on the traditional use of the network of TSRs and Travelling Stock Routes in New South Wales, focussing on the Cooma RLPB District. This session also provides a background to the visit on the second day of the workshop to Round Plain TSR.

### **Why TSRs came into existence**

The origin and use of TSRs in the nineteenth and the first three decades of the twentieth centuries came about due to basic necessity, as all livestock were moved by droving and there was a need for access through lands by the shortest possible route. There was also a need to have designated areas of public land available for livestock to rest overnight with feed and water. These routes and reserves were controlled by Pastures Protection Boards (renamed Rural Lands Protection Boards in 1989).

TSR paddocks were strategically located at intervals along the Travelling Stock Routes. The law stated that healthy adult sheep were required to travel a minimum of six miles (about 10 km) per day and healthy adult cattle were required to travel a minimum of ten miles (about 16 km) per day.

Stock were walked for a variety of reasons and examples are as follows:

- Movement between properties for normal management purposes,
- To public markets for sale and to other holdings after private sales,
- Agistment in times of drought ie movement to other districts and utilization of "the long paddock" in times of feed and water shortages, and
- Seasonal movements - these were important in the Monaro region due to movement of livestock to high altitude grassy plains for summer/autumn grazing and return to the lower altitude plains for late autumn/winter/spring months.

Drovers and/or livestock owners were required to obtain a permit from the Board. The cost of this permit was calculated on the number and type of livestock and the distance to be walked. Slower rates of travel could be authorised for ewes and lambs, cows and calves, malnourished stock and if there was congestion on the routes ie slow stock ahead.

The income from walking stock permits, agistment and grazing permits was kept in a separate fund at the Board and used for maintenance and improvements on the Travelling Stock Routes and TSR paddocks. This maintenance and improvement included fences, tanks, dams, troughs, stockyards, noxious animal and noxious weed control.

Other uses of TSRs prescribed under the regulations of the Pastures Protection Act (Rural Lands Protection Act from 1989) were as follows: walking, horse riding, picnicking, fishing, swimming, pedal cycling. They were also available for Apiary Sites at an annual fee.

Most of these above details and prescribed uses still apply, however, the use of railways and later road transport for the movement of livestock increased rapidly from the 1930s. This resulted in a steady decline in the use of TSRs to the stage that some Boards relinquished these routes and reserves, or only retained those that were of higher strategic or economic value.

## **Current TSR audit**

Currently, RLP Boards throughout NSW are conducting an audit of all TSRs to assess their value, measured against the following criteria:

- Use by travelling stock,
- Grazing use,
- Environmental value,
- Economic value,
- Recreational use, and
- Use for apiary permits.

This audit may result in further changes to the TSR network throughout NSW generally and in the Cooma Board in particular. It would be premature to suggest what these changes may be. Under the following heading there are details of contemporary approaches to the management of TSRs in the Cooma Rural Lands Protection Board District.

## **More recent use of TSRs: balancing traditional uses and conservation**

Many of the traditional uses of TSRs have declined and only a few in the Cooma Board District are regularly used for walking stock. Most income is generated from Annual Grazing Permits. These permits allow a ratepayer to graze livestock on and care for the TSR for an annual fee under the overall supervision of the Board.

The amount of the fee is calculated on the area of the TSR, the grazing potential, likely damage to vegetation, prevailing seasonal conditions, level of weed infestation and any other factors which may be unique to a particular TSR.

Recently the Board notified ratepayers about a proposal to transfer some TSRs to the custodianship of the NPWS as a result of the Southern Regional Forest Agreement. This generated written and verbal comments from some ratepayers supporting the Board retaining control, mainly for the following reasons:

- Some TSRs remain vital to the economical movement of sheep and cattle by graziers with widely dispersed holdings within the Board District;
- TSRs were identified as having a cultural/heritage value;
- Concern was expressed that TSRs would become fire hazards if not grazed regularly.
- Landholders thought that the Nature Reserves created by a change of custodianship would become additional havens for wild dogs and feral pigs;
- Management by NPWS would mean that access would be restricted for other prescribed uses;
- During severe localized drought, TSRs could still be used so livestock could be walked out of the Board District. Fragmentation of the TSR network would prevent this happening; and
- The Cooma Rural Lands Protection Board could enter into Voluntary Conservation Agreements with NPWS and satisfy conservation aims, while retaining the TSR Network, for the above reasons.

A few ratepayers felt that the Board should relinquish control of the TSRs due to the cost of maintaining this network.

Since the early 1990s various conservation groups and the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service have shown interest in some of the TSRs. Surveys have been conducted and most of the TSRs have been categorized as high, medium or low value for conservation purposes. Various rare, threatened or endangered species of native flora and fauna have been identified on these TSRs.

Recommendations have been made to better manage the TSRs of high and medium conservation values to achieve harmony between use for grazing and long-term conservation aims. These

include different stocking rates or altered times of the year when livestock are allowed to graze. Some strategies have been suggested to preserve or enhance vulnerable and threatened species of flora and fauna on these TSRs.

There is unanimous recognition by the RLP Board, graziers and conservation groups that the greatest threat to the native grasslands and improved pastures of the Monaro is invasion by weeds, particularly by grass weeds such as Serrated Tussock, African Lovegrass and Chilean Needle Grass. This last species is not known to occur in the Cooma Rural Lands Protection Board at this time. It is established in the neighboring Braidwood RLP Board District and is likely to be identified in this Board District in the very near future.

The Cooma RLPB will need additional external funding to continue to address the overall problem of noxious weed control. This is particularly so if grazing has to be reduced and there will be less income produced by these reserves.

Grazing is also a practical, economical and environmentally friendly way of controlling many weeds. Vipers Bugloss is a good example of a weed which can be controlled by grazing with sheep. Quite a lot of experience is needed to ensure that this weed is grazed with enough sheep at the correct time to prevent it becoming a dominant species and at the same time not over-grazing to create potential for invasion by other weeds.

The alternative is to spray the Vipers Bugloss with chemicals. However, to effectively control it there would need to be multiple applications of chemicals through the spring and summer months.

When John Benson, Senior Plant Ecologist, Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney, first inspected some of the TSRs, he was of the opinion that the greatest threat to bio-diversity and rare/vulnerable/endangered flora was disturbance from regular grazing and frequent burning. However, one ungrazed cemetery site within a TSR and some ungrazed churchyards/cemeteries revealed less diversity and rare species than TSRs that had been regularly grazed or burnt.

### **Round Plain TRS visit**

The Round Plain TSR that will be inspected on the field trip on the second day of the workshop provides some interesting contrasts.

- An open section that has been regularly burnt ie about every 2 or 3 years and is generally not grazed.
- A fenced section that is regularly grazed.
- Round Plain churchyard and cemetery, which is mowed but not grazed, adjoins the fenced TSR.

### **Concluding remarks**

The Cooma Rural Lands Protection Board Directors and Staff are of the opinion that a balance can be achieved between the use of TSRs for traditional purposes and the long-term conservation of native grasslands. There need to be long-term strategic management plans in place that take into account these diverse aims. The ultimate key to success will be the provision of adequate long-term funding to implement these management plans.