

Stock Routes

STOCK ROUTES UPDATE

There have been several previous reports in NPA News regarding the importance and status of the Stock Routes system and the work of the Stock Routes Coalition. It is pleasing to note that the Government has now agreed to stand-alone legislation. There was a concern that the stock routes, their management and preservation, would be part of some existing legislation, which would have had the effect of watering down their importance.

A recent report to the Stock Routes Coalition (of which NPAQ is a member) has addressed the current status, after all the lobbying, viz;

Known successes.

- Retention of the entire network.

- Management of all the values of the stock route. Sections of the network through some national parks closed with an alternate route skirting the park established.

- Expansion of the Stock Route Panel.

- The State to make a plan for the entire network. Local governments will continue to administer the network and be the sole permit issuer but must comply with the state's minimum standards.

- Clear and transparent processes to define the various segments of the stock route from active through to inactive are being developed.

- A standard approach to the assessment of pasture and soil condition and other values is being developed.

- Guidelines on where and when grazing may occur are being developed.

- Strategies for the management of weeds, feral pests and fire to ensure the values of the network not adversely impacted.

- Strong emphasis on education, compliance and enforcement issues.

- Enhanced funding raised through a user pays system so management is not subsidised by local rate payers.

The importance to biodiversity of the stock route network is confirmed in a detailed report "Enhancing Biodiversity Hotspots along Western Queensland Stock Routes" by Brian Walsh, South West NRM Ltd, May 2009. The report can be accessed via the following link www.southwestnrm.org.au/information/downloads/p203739.pdf

of management in respect of the SRN. The four western Natural Resource Management bodies (Southern Gulf Catchments Ltd, Desert Channels Queensland Inc, South West NRM Ltd, and Queensland Murray Darling Committee Inc) together with the Department of Environment and Resource Management and funds from the Commonwealth Government, set out from May to August 2008 to map and identify potential sites, carry out field visits to verify values and threats and to make management recommendations for identified biodiversity hotspots.

During this process, the stock route map was overlain with known features such as National Parks, Conservation areas (public and private), wetlands and regional ecosystems. Some 28 National Parks were identified as being traversed by stock routes. This identification resulted in some routes being diverted where practicable, as noted above.

The report contains comments on the origin of the stock routes, some of their history and human associations and can be commended to members as not being a dry technical document. There is also a bird list which would be of interest to the Bird Group.

Considerable concern was expressed with respect to the future of the stock route network (SRN) in Queensland and travelling stock route's (TSR) in New South Wales. The concern was that Queensland must not follow down the same path as the southern states. The reason for the concern was expressed in an article in the May 2008 NPA NEWS and is briefly outlined below.

Whilst historically primarily promulgated for the purpose of moving stock around the country (1840-1880), what many people do not realise is that these historical stock routes are a valuable resource now for remnant and in-danger flora and fauna (bio-diversity conservation). Often they are the only source for regeneration or recuperation after all the surrounding lands have been cleared or devastated by fire. In Queensland there are approximately 72,000 kilometers (2.6 million hectares) of road network declared as stock route. They can be the only food source for the birds in their vicinity due to the adjacent agricultural practice of broad-scale clearing. They can be the only wildlife corridor available. They can be the only fauna shelter. They also have cultural and heritage significance to both Indigenous and European people and sometimes even followed old trading paths.

These routes, together with Reserves for travelling stock, make up the Queensland Stock Route Network (SRN) and sometimes are adjacent to, or even pass through, parts of the Protected Area Estate, an area of concern to the Association. Stock routes are pathways for travelling stock on roads, reserves, unallocated state land and pastoral leases. Every stock route is a road but every road is not a stock route. In addition, some routes do not have roads as they are "inactive". For stock route management purposes the term "road" refers to the road reserve (or road corridor, which can vary in width from 60 to 1600 meters), not just the constructed part (carriageway) of the road.

The problem is arising because Local Governments are responsible for the management under the policies set down by the Government and the costs associated with the supervision and management are becoming an increasing burden to them. Hence the management plans of the SRN's that the local authority is required to have, are of low priority with regard to all the other costs of running a shire, leading to the thrust to divest themselves of this perceived burden.

A side issue is a more subliminal one regarding the visual asset that the vegetated stock route provides to the personal well-being of the travelling public. It can also be a tourism asset in the regional landscape, giving relief to what could be otherwise a long and boring trip. They can also have a social connection in providing recreational trails and utilities corridors.

The conservation bodies and like minded organizations and citizens in both Queensland and New South Wales have formed a Stock Routes Coalition (including this Association) and are currently developing strategies to ensure that all sectors of government realise the valuable asset that is incumbent in these SRN's, particularly with the advent of climate change. Additional and more detailed information and avenues for support can be found on the Coalition's website.

An early result of the concerns expressed to the Premier and the relevant Minister for Natural Resources and Water, The Hon Craig Wallace, was that the latter issued a statement on the 28 May 2008 that: "The Queensland Government has no intention to sell off or lease Queensland's iconic stock route network - in part or whole." This is a welcome statement but much needs to be done to amend the current legislation, to ensure that there is stand alone legislation with a Head of Power, setting out the aims and objects as briefly touched on above. There is still a thrust however, from some industry sectors to lease such land (some stock route portions are already leased and this practice need to cease due to the damage already reported). It is considered that such a step of long term leasing would be against the continued viability of the bio-diversity and the droving industry.

The Stock Routes Coalition has produced a Log of Claims and this is viewable on the Coalitions website. Other statements such as that from 500 concerned scientists are also viewable on that website.