A preliminary study of farm advisors and the advice given to farmers about native pasture and whole farm management

A report prepared as part of project UME 25 Improving Market Outcomes: The Case of Native Grasslands

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Purpose of the study

This was a preliminary study of farm advisers who work in North Eastern Victoria. It was undertaken to obtain a better understanding of the sources of information available that is available to farmers and how it is used to improve farm management practices. The findings of this work were to provide for better targeting of the outputs of Native Grassland project in order to increase the acceptance by farm advisers to an increase the level of on farm adoption of sound native pasture management.

The study has produced recommendations for communication, research and education to improve the flow of information on native pastures to both field workers and policy makers. Adoption of these recommendations will lead to the development of a better policy framework for the conservation of native grasslands and to the provision of more comprehensive information to farmers.

Method used

Five advisers based in north eastern Victoria were interviewed by telephone interviews in November and December of 1997. They were drawn from the disciplines of pasture management, farm financial analysis, land protection and conservation. Advisers from both the private and public sectors took part. The interview guide contained both pre-coded and open ended questions.

Information was obtained on the time spent working with farmers individually and in groups, the content of the advice they provided, the sources that they used to obtain technical information, and where they referred farmers for specialist information.

Part of the interview was structured to determine their approach to giving advice within the whole farm context and what they saw as the principal constraints to the use of the whole farm approach when working with individuals or groups of farmers.

A series of questions also covered the advisers experience with and their attitudes towards native pastures on farms in their area. The final part of the interview was designed to obtain information on the advisers current use of spreadsheets in their work with farmers and to determined their interest in testing and later using the pasture utilisation and economic models developed in this project.

Results

Method of providing advice

Advisers work with farmers both in group and individually. Recently more emphasis has been placed on working with groups of farmers rather than on a one to one basis. This is true for both the public and private sector. Working with groups has the benefit of making more efficient use of the advisers time and it also provides a good learning environment for group members. All advisers reported that there is a large demand for advice on a one to one basis both for the adaptation of general principles to individual properties and for confidential financial planning advice. One adviser reported considerable contact with individual farmers in the form of "provision of recipes" over the telephone.

Type of advice that is given

Information is provided by advisors on a wide range of topics, including the selection of pasture species, productivity and management, fertilisers, financial planning, soil and water management including the reduction of salinity recharge.

Table 1

TYPE OF ADVICE PROVIDED

Adviser / **Topic**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**2**	**5**
agronomy	Yes				
pasture management	Yes	Yes	Yes		
salinity / land protection				Yes	
nature conservation				Yes	
farm finances	Yes	Yes			Yes
farm budget			Yes		Yes
accounting					Yes
tax					Yes
farm family		Yes		Yes	Yes
enterprise marketing		Yes			
farm planning		Yes		Yes	
soil and water management				Yes	

Sources of information used by advisers

Advisers obtain new information on pastures and their management from a variety of sources. These include published literature, the world wide web and other electronic sources. They also learn a considerable amount from discussions with farmers about their practical experiences with pasture establishment and management.

Cooperative programs coordinated by CRCs, Rural Industry Research Funds and similar organisations serve as important sources of technical information through demonstration trials, by encouraging personal contacts with others who are involved in the project and by the publication of results. The Grassland Society was the only professional society mentioned as a source of information on native pastures.

Table 2 indicates the variety of information sources that the advisers use to keep abreast of new developments within their fields. Although two advisers indicated the value of the world wide web as means of obtaining information two traditional sources of information, personal contact and libraries are still very important to the majority of advisers.

Advisers from private had little knowledge of who were the government advisers on land protection and nature conservation in the region where they worked. Whereas the three government advisers were all able to name specialist sources of information in the private sector.

Table 2

SOURCES OF TECHNICAL INFORMATION USED BY ADVISERS

Source of Information	**Number**
Personal library	2
World wide web	2
Libraries research centres	4
Personal contact with farmers and others	4
Professional Journals	2
Professional Societies	2
Field observations	1

Use of whole farm approach

All the advisers who were interviewed agreed that it was essential that advice is given within the whole farm context, although they gave varied interpretations of what they see as the whole farm approach. The two respondents with a strong financial background, both from the private sector, thought in terms of financial viability, credit mix, cash flow and risk management. This contrasts with the views of those with a background in natural resource management. in the public sector. The latter emphasised the complexity of the farm and the need to take account of personal goals together with as profit optimisation.

Constraints to use of whole farm approach

All advisers indicated that cost and time to both the adviser and farmer were a major constraint to the adoption of the whole farm approach. Farmer expectations of a quick fix or simple solution was also seen as a barrier to the more comprehensive approach.

Other constraints include the limited capacity of farmers to provide the necessary physical and financial data about their farm and frequently they do not have sufficient cash flow for development projects. One financial adviser was concerned that many farmers have difficulty thinking within the concept of the whole farm and do not have the ability to successfully manage risk.

A further major impediment to the adoption of the whole farm approach arises because specialist staff from both the private and public sector do not have the training or experience to provide advice within the whole farm context. Government staff who are in direct contact with landholders frequently have been trained to give advice within specific disciplines (e.g. tree growing, weed control) and do not have the ability to integrate their advice within the context of the whole farm. Further, solicitors, accountants, and commercial representatives are not in a position to assess the total impact of their advice on the integrated management of the farm. Competing demands on their time work against the provision of more comprehensive advice.

Referral to specialist sources

All respondents indicated that they advise farmers to seek further specialist advice. Bank managers, accountants, tax specialists, solicitors (estate planning), fertiliser and chemical sales staff were all given as points of referral. One adviser expressed concern was expressed at the tendency of some private consultants and government agency staff to provide advice outside of their area of competence.

Knowledge of native grass species

All extension staff, both private and government had a good knowledge of native grass species. They were able to name several genera that they could readily recognise in the field. Grasses that were named included, kangaroo grass, wallaby grass, weeping grass and spear grass

Experience with the management of native grasslands

All participants had at some time recommended to farmers that they sow introduced pasture species into native pasture paddocks. The areas were usually in the poorer part of the farm with shallow skeletal soil. Government advisers said that they were less likely to give this advice now than they were several years ago.

This contrasted with the view of the two private advisers who argued strongly that given financial pressures including high overhead costs, all areas of the farm need to be fully

developed to maximise the financial return from the farm. To achieve this native pastures need to be replaced with higher producing introduced legumes and grass species.

An adviser from the private sector also doubted whether many farmers had the knowledge or ability to apply the management strategies needed to successfully manage native grasslands. A government adviser reported that requests for advice on management techniques for native grassland often comes from farmers with off farm income including hobby farmers.

One government adviser also questioned the value of phalaris based pastures both in terms of the longevity of the pasture under poor management regimes and the value of these types of pasture in reducing ground water recharge. Phalaris was also criticised because of its ability to invade roadsides where it presents a fire hazard and blocks vision at intersections. This respondent also questioned the value of the government incentive programs which encouraged sowing down of recharge areas. These areas often carried a good cover of native grasses, were expensive to improve, diverted farmers time, money and management skills away from the potentially more productive parts of the farm. The advisor stated that there is a case for cross compliance agreements that allow incentives to be provided for the development of the potentially more productive areas of the farm while guaranteeing the protection the native species on the less accessible ridge lines and skeletal soils. This would provide a means of conserving native grassland areas while still providing for increased production from the farm.

Spreadsheets

All respondents used spreadsheets in their work and indicated a willingness to trial the outputs of this project. Spreadsheets currently in use included Excel, Lotus 1,2,3, and specialist pasture management packages.

Conclusions

Although only a small number of advisers were interviewed it is apparent that the management of native pastures is an important issue there are strong views both for and against the retaining of native pastures on farms in north eastern Victoria.

Conflicting advice on native pasture management is given by government and private sources. Much of this advice comes from specialists who have little appreciation of whole farm management. The individual farmer / manager is responsible for implementing this conflicting advice. The decision to retain native pastures will depend on the nature of the individual farm, its financial situation and goals of the individual farm manger.

The property management planning program (Farm$mart) is playing an increasing role in providing both the framework and vehicle for the delivery of farmer education it thus provides the means for raising awareness for improving the knowledge skills of the managers and for placing the management of native grassland in the whole farm context.

Steps need to be taken to resolve the apparent differences views on the value of native pastures that are held by practitioners in the private and government sectors. Initially a series of focus group discussions could would to determine the nature of these differences and the steps necessary to rectify them.

Where government financial incentives are provided for the management of natural resources the programs should take full account of all available opportunities to achieve cross compliance and in order to optimise both individual economic benefits and community conservation benefits from this expenditure.

The increased emphasis in recent years on services being provided on a user pays basis has caused a major reduction on information services that have a significant conservation component. The conservation / production split is becoming stronger.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1.

That as farmers are responsible for decisions on their farms they should be the prime focus of education programs on the management of native grasslands. The property management planning program provides the ideal means of improving their ability to make fully informed decisions.

Recommendation 2.

That are series of focus group discussions are held with participants drawn from government advisory services, farm consultants, banking, financial services, chemical and fertilizer sales and other farm service industries. The groups would determine the basis for the differences in advice given on native pasture management and indicate where further research and education is needed to resolve these differences.

Recommendation 3.

That where financial incentives are provided for native natural resource management all aspects of cross compliance are explored with the view to maximising native grassland conservation and optimising farm income.