

Technology interaction and policy evolution; Grassland Society of Southern Australia inc

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Background The Grassland Society of Southern Australia was formed in 1959 to provide a forum for the transfer of information, ideas and experiences in relation to all aspects of grassland establishment, maintenance, utilisation, persistence and research. The membership of over 2,000 is composed primarily of primary producers (80%) with extension and research scientists comprising 10%, agribusiness 8% and academia 2%. The major interests of members are wool, lamb and beef production, dairying and cropping. The society produces bi-monthly newsletters, holds an annual conference with attendances between 400 and 600 annually and has a branch structure that hosts local events. The society is focused on disseminating information from researchers to primary producers.

Highlights of actions to improve technological interaction

The Grasslands Productivity Programme (GPP) The GPP has been an important event in the history of the wool industry in south-east Australia. It empowered participants to seek information, gain skills and to challenge and intensify their pasture management. Furthermore it provided hope to some stakeholders in the wool industry that it was possible for wool producers to become more productive and thereby lower the cost of producing wool. Papers reporting on this programme are presented at IGC, Dublin, by Geoff Saul and Jason Trompf. The GPP provided farmers with a comparison of their current farm practices and a management package of increased fertiliser application, increased stocking rate and improved management skills. The novel approach to on-farm extension has since been widely adopted across a range of agricultural industries.

The Pasture Web Database A joint project by the University of Melbourne Institute of Land and Food Resources and the Grassland Society of Southern Australia (formerly the Grassland Society of Victoria) saw the launch of a web-based interactive database on Pasture Species and Cultivars in 2001. The database holds information on 37 species and 242 cultivars. A workshop was held in 2003 with Prof. David Hannaway (USA) and Prof. David Chapman (Australia) to explore whether or not the website could include GIS technology and spatial layering in the future.

Activities to influence policy

Best Practice for Phosphorus Fertiliser Application on Improved Pasture in Victoria In the late 90's several dry years exacerbated problems with excessive nutrient in waterways resulting in eutrophication and algal blooms. Farmers were often accused of being the source of the problem and reports in the media were often inaccurate and unfounded. In a proactive step the Society released Fertiliser Best Practice Guidelines to increase the understanding of farmers of the implications of fertiliser application. This was picked up and carried by all the major fertiliser industries and is still used as a resource today.

Leasing Kit Another reflection of our changing society is the increased age of our farmers and the large amounts of capital required by younger people to begin farming. The information kit was developed with guidelines for lessees and lessors to encourage the leasing of land. Many older farmers, whilst not wanting to continue working on the properties, were not ready to leave the farm. This presented an ideal entry point for younger farmers with energy and some capital but not sufficient to purchase land.

Plans for future initiatives

Pastures from Space At the time of writing the Society is organising a workshop with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) and representatives from State Departments of Agriculture to evaluate whether or not the Pastures from Space program can be adapted for commercial use in the eastern states of Australia. The program uses satellites, modelling and software to predict and interpret pasture growth rate. It is currently calibrated for annual pasture and the society is keen to explore its use with perennial pasture in the south-eastern states of Australia for on-farm use.

Safe Off Site A second project under consideration is the Safe Off Site computer software program which is an online data back-up program. As well as providing a service to members, it has the advantage of providing a royalty stream to the Society. A pilot will be offered to members in early 2005.