

# A New Approach to Managing Roadsides

by Brian Marshall

Exposure to Holistic Management changes the way you drive down the road. You just look at land differently now! You notice the variation in roadside vegetation and compare it with adjoining property over the fence. You recognize the effect of brittleness, identify plant species, overgrazed or overrested plants, the use of fire or technology (mowing or spraying), evidence of soil erosion, etc. . . . all at highway speed. Knowledge of the ecosystem processes, tools to manipulate biodiversity, the brittleness scale and the carbon cycle allow us to reason why plants and soil are in a particular state and consider how this land could be “improved” if management decisions were tested toward a holistic goal.

In the state of New South Wales, Shire Councils and Rural Land Protection Boards (RLPB) “manage” this land, and we landholders are rated and levied to pay for it. Road verges are occasionally mowed, noxious weeds are supposed to be sprayed (often the same patches year after year) and fire is rarely intentionally used as a tool. Grazing permits are issued to owners of traveling livestock with the objectives of walking animals to another location and/or providing grazing to livestock along the “stock routes” in times of feed shortage. Widespread, prolonged drought in Eastern Australia has again forced thousands of cattle and sheep onto our stock routes, but this land is not being managed holistically.

Human induced climate change is finally in the news. People are debating the merits of carbon credits and trading. Sound grassland management is being promoted and recognized as effective carbon sequestration. If the symptoms of declining biodiversity were better understood, and the tools of grazing, animal impact and rest applied to reverse the predominant partial and total resting of plants and soil on roadsides everywhere, a valuable community resource could be much better utilized and the expenses of local bureaucracy greatly reduced. RLPB's and Shire Councils could even make some money and demonstrate to the traveling public an example of, and commitment to, Holistic Management.

We could effectively manage the roads of any local government area by creating a policy that positively recognizes community, profit and healthy land, and how the roadsides offer an opportunity to create those things we want. In brief, the key components of this policy would be:

- Livestock needing to utilize public roads



440 cattle grazing roadside verge outside Brian's property.

must conform to a grazing plan for the shire road network.

- Owners of stock wishing to use the roads must pay to join the herd (or “mob”) and accept compulsory electronic tagging as primary ownership identification. Management tags, fire brands and/or paint branding could assist identification. The agistment (or “custom grazing”) rate is varied by the Shire in order to always attract sufficient stock numbers to adequately manage roadside under varying seasonal conditions.

- The mob must be maintained at high density. Drovers who could be contractors or Council staff, the owners of the livestock (or employees), receive some training and have ownership in the Shire's or RLPB's holistic goal or the objectives of the policy. Two people, plus a few good dogs and some portable electric fencing, could handle a large mob most of the time.

- Water (and nutritional supplement if required) would be moved with the mob in a shire water truck, which could be fitted with bolt-on or towable steel water trough(s). Overnight temporary fencing and water could be planned using all the factors of a well developed grazing plan, plus an evolving future land plan that facilitates large numbers of livestock regularly grazing roadsides. Provision of stock water for filling trucks and overnight enclosures would be a priority.

- Road use regulations must be revised and implemented by the Roads & Traffic Authority so traffic gives way to this mob at all times. Warning signs, flashing lights and enforced reduced speed limit signs must be appropriately positioned and moved.

- Only one or two large mobs would be on the road in the whole shire. The livestock are generally quiet after a few days—particularly at high density with good planning providing

feed and water.

- Adjoining landholders along roadsides would be obligated to maintain fences. Drovers would check gates, tape off entry ramps (cattle guards), etc.

This plan could work, and we would save a great deal of government money while providing additional opportunities for profit. Moreover, the roadsides would be in better health. But it is critical that we demand this kind of service at the grassroots. Ask your shire, county or local government area officials to consider this option. If you are a livestock producer, volunteer your services so that others can see how such an enterprise serves everyone—and makes the roadside verge something of which to be proud. ♪

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On right side of fence, cattle have grazed a roadside verge at high animal impact. This type of treatment could actually improve land health unlike herbicide spraying.