

## PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS: THE SOCIETY, THE PRODUCER, AND PASTURES

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### ABSTRACT

*The growth of the Tropical Grassland Society, the parallel development of pastures, and the depressed state of the beef cattle industry are outlined. The Society has maintained its traditional field meetings and the production of the Journal, and suggestions are made for more involvement by the producer. The wisdom of developing wallum country in south-east Queensland is questioned. The alternative of development by more intensive production of the better and more fertile lands combined with the integration of more temperate pasture species with tropical pastures in southern Queensland is proposed. There is a continuing need for research, for more factual information on costs of development, and for market analyses.*

The first presidential address given in 1963 was entitled "The Dependence of Man". Mr. Pulsford then summarised the development of the world's agricultural and pastoral industries and projected the statistics of the past into requirements for the year 1980. With only four years remaining until 1980 the history of the Tropical Grasslands Society might well parallel developments in these fields in Australia.

So after an interesting year as President and a year of great personal hardship for many members, I consider that the Society could well pause and consider its future role.

In 1963 there were 253 members of the Society, in 1970, 617 and today 747. This last figure is misleading due to a high proportion of unfinancial members.

The rapid growth of the Society matched rural development in the 1960's and 1970's, especially in the field of tropical pasture improvement which reached a peak for plantings in Queensland of 285,000 ha in 1972/1973, but dropped to 127,000 ha in 1974/1975. The enthusiasm generated by a generally profitable cattle industry was reflected in membership, but the disastrous state of the industry for the last 18 months has had the effect of stabilising total membership and in fact reducing the primary producer membership. The producer membership was approximately 200 five years ago but has now dwindled to only 160. Scientists, research and extension workers have always comprised the major portion of membership and will become increasingly dominant. With this in mind consideration might be given to forming a Student Category of membership especially as Brisbane is the centre of tertiary education. The scattered nature of the Society's membership is a drawback and consideration might also be given for funds to be made available for the President to visit the branches during the year to maintain communication.

The principal activities of the Society comprise publication of the Newsletter and The Journal and the promotion of Field Days. The Newsletter serves the basic function of advising members of coming events, executive meetings, membership and technical literature available.

The Journal has achieved through the dedication of its editors over the years an enviable reputation for the quality of its contents and high standard of publication. It is the Society's major service to its professional and overseas members, being principally devoted to the publication of research work.

Field Meetings have developed into a pattern with three meetings a year, those in autumn and spring generally being held in the "Field" when tropical pastures can be seen to greater advantage, and the mid year meeting taking the form of an indoor

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symposium, either of one or two day's duration. This year saw a departure from this broad principle in that the Maryborough meeting recognised the state of the beef industry and brought together expertise to discuss the particular problem of the beef producer in a depressed economic climate. The Society by its composition should always endeavour to meet the challenge of the times and provide leadership in bringing together those associated with all aspects of beef and dairy production.

It would not be an oversimplification to divide the areas at present served by the Society into four zones:—

1. South East Queensland.
2. The Burnett Region.
3. The Mackay Region.
4. Interstate and Overseas.

The sheer size of Queensland and Australia makes the attempt to broaden the activities of the Society into other areas extremely difficult yet the Society has much to offer producers in other areas such as the Darling Downs, the Brigalow Development areas, Central Queensland and far North Queensland.

The success of the Mackay Branch where activities have been adjusted to distance and membership could act as a guide to renewed interest in other regions, but only, I am sure, when the beef industry again reaches a state of assured profitability. Whilst the scientist and extension worker by their very professionalism will always support the Society, the producer will only belong if he can improve his profitability by such membership. Increasingly the family unit which traditionally formed the basis for the beef and dairy industries is being replaced by the large corporation and investor. These latter have changed the broadly intuitive nature of animal production into one of economics. The large amounts of capital required to adequately develop pastures on the scale attempted even five years ago is now generally beyond the means of the average beef producer. The dairy farmer, especially those who supply whole milk will be able to continue to improve their pastures assisted by the Dairy Pasture Subsidy Scheme. Their type of operation based on the family unit with small intensive areas of development and governmental appreciation of the value of improved pastures for dairy production provides an extensive area for the Society's assistance at a time when the beef producer is unable to make use of the technology available. The end result of all pasture research is to enable the grazier and dairy farmer to produce more economically.

I do not believe that the producer is unaware of the benefits available from the Society, which take two principal forms.

Firstly, attendance at Field Meetings provides him with information from the practical producer who has put into practice the theories of the scientist and professional. It enables him to discuss a range of topics with both producers and scientists and gives him a visual appreciation of pasture development and animal production. But for many it also gives an incentive to emulate and if possible, surpass. Without incentive there would be no development.

Secondly, it is appreciated that the Journal must cater for all members and if viewed purely from the number of professional scientists who are members, there needs to be a preponderance of scientific articles. Results from wholly research establishments presented in scientifically technical form do not have great appeal to most producers. The Field Meetings are well recorded and provide much practical information. Attempts to have producers submit articles have not been a success for obvious reasons, the principal being a lack of time due to the problems of managing and running a large business investment, in many cases single handed. Urban businesses with an investment comparable to that of the average grazing property would certainly employ a considerable staff.

The way in which producers could present information through the Journal might be to collaborate with the professional members in joint submissions. The theoretical would then be amalgamated with the practical. As commercial producers

just do not appear to be able to match the claims of the research worker, might I suggest that consideration be given to articles on particular case studies on such matters as:—

1. Land preparation, planting and fertilizing costs.
2. Maintenance and costs.
3. Commercial carrying capacities of pasture types.
4. Cost benefit and economic studies.

I realise the objections that may be made to such articles but a significant proportion of our members are primary producers. Such subjects presuppose an amalgamation of resources, technical, economic and practical to produce such information. Production figures and costs quoted at our Field Meetings and subsequently published in the Journal have been queried, if not by question then in discussion. The translation of research establishment costs into the commercial world of the producer is not easy. The provision of such practical and factual information from case studies would contribute greatly to the overall objectivity of the Journal.

As the involvement of the producer is essential to the continued viability of the Society, consideration could be given to more intimate activities such as farm walks, informal evening discussions, sub-branches in districts and on a more comprehensive scale, joint venturing with kindred societies.

To this end the Society should perhaps consider broadening its approach, to integrate more livestock production with its Field Meetings. I believe that when we have done this in the past attendances have been much larger and interest in pastures stimulated. However, pasture development should continue to be the Society's foremost aim. With the majority of members resident in South-east Queensland it is natural that this area has witnessed the greatest impact from the Society's activities and it is the area with which I am most familiar.

Broadly this region comprises the coastal lowlands or Wallum, forested country generally undulating to hilly, the volcanic plateaux and the alluvial river and creek flats. It is not surprising that the history of development has been in the reverse order of that description. Wallum development up until three or four years ago was the most spectacular, although by observation I am inclined to think that more pasture development took place in the forested and more inland country. Dairying with its attendant temperate pastures has always dominated development on the more fertile lands, whilst beef cattle production has progressively opened up the forest country.

The advent of introduced grasses and legumes within the last 20 years and the enterprise of research workers created an enthusiasm for development of what was then considered a less hostile environment in the wetter coastal lands where the reliability of rainfall would enable these species to thrive. Large tracts of wallum land were thrown open to ballot and the published papers on viability, carrying capacity, together with an upsurge in beef prices, production incentives and more readily available money attracted many graziers to these areas. The fact of their being less isolated and closer to urban amenities must also be acknowledged. However, unlike more temperate and fertile areas a history of management had not been built up and the delicate balance that created viability collapsed with the onset of the decline in beef prices, an unsympathetic Government and the cancellation of those very incentives which had made development more attractive.

The hazards of development in the wallum have now been publicised and documented. As one who has experienced them, I wonder if it was all worthwhile, for, to experience a rainfall of 4680 mm in 20 months, pasture protein levels of 2.2% and incredible regrowth problems would daunt even the wealthiest and most stout of heart. Today, prohibitive costs of clearing, land preparation and maintenance have ended an era when it was doubtful if any commercial cattleman was able to achieve production comparable to that claimed by research establishments in a similar environment. Meatworks buyers who claim that cattle from these areas "weigh light" do not encourage a return to production in these coastal lowlands.

The future of pasture developments in the forested areas must also be in jeopardy with fertilizer and labour costs related to return, but it is probable that these areas will continue to be developed but on a lesser scale.

On the volcanic plateaux the traditional dairying industry is gradually being replaced by the hobby farmer and the retired, while the fertile alluvial river and creek flats have not changed significantly in their use.

The Society has been associated closely with pastures in all these environments, but its very name "Tropical" has deterred a proportion of producers from participating in its activities. Could it be that the Society's name needs reviewing if the decline in farmer/grazier membership is to be arrested?

South east Queensland is not a totally tropic environment and the more fertile areas tend for at least portion of the year to be more suited to temperate species. This is particularly so of the dairying districts where the history of milk production from tropical pastures has not been satisfactory. Beef producers, however, have benefited enormously from the introduction of tropical pastures. Field days where both tropical and temperate species have been evaluated have been well attended and the integration of both into management systems would appear to offer many benefits, especially where intensive production of the more fertile areas is possible.

I also query the "get big or get out" philosophy, for a skilful development of pastures especially when allied with irrigation can create an extremely productive farm unit. I am also convinced that if more had hastened slowly in their developments their chances of survival under the present circumstances would have been much greater. Smaller areas well developed and capable of being maintained are a better investment than poorer development of large tracts of marginal land. Therefore might it not have been wiser to have foregone development of the wallum and the coastal forests and instead concentrated on upgrading developed and semi-developed but idle country in the more fertile areas. It would not have been spectacular but a return on investment would have been more probable. Return per beast area is the criterion for a profitable beef cattle enterprise. The non-availability of manpower may also yet force the producer to intensify into smaller more manageable areas.

In retrospect therefore some particular features which have a direct bearing on the Society's activities emerge from recent events:

- The need for continuing research for particular environments;
- More evidence of production capabilities of pastures on a long term basis and their integration into the whole farming or grazing enterprise;
- Reliable up to date and factual costs of development;
- Improved market analyses to enable assessment of future prospects in a particular industry and communication of such information to the producer.

As the composition of pasture species and fertilizer requirements would in general appear to be reasonably well defined in relation to particular areas, techniques directed toward minimum development and incorporating native species now have greater appeal for the more extensive grazing areas, even though slower and less productive initially.

In conclusion, too little publicity has been given to the fact that there was only one boom year for the beef producer, 1973, and that the boom really did not last for the whole year. B.A.E. statistics show a price for ox beef of 54.6 c/kg in 1961, fluctuating to 61.0 c/kg in 1972, rising to 93.5 c/kg in 1973 and then dipping dramatically. Despite what can only be described as a very static price for the period 1961 to 1973, this period saw the greatest expansion of pasture development. In real terms however, returns up to 1972 had steadily dropped when inflation was taken into account. It is remarkable that the area of tropical pasture developed was so great and I hesitate to predict that such will happen again.