Agricultural extension in the North-West and Kimberley Regions

W M. Nunn
Department of Agriculture

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SHORTLY after the depression of 1929 and the early “thirties” I found myself in the north-eastern wheatbelt, employed as Agricultural Adviser in the Wheat Branch and charged with the responsibility of taking scientific agriculture to the farmers of those parts. The best farmers were struggling hard to stay on their properties; the majority were fighting losing battles and were not overpleased with the Government of the day or with any of its representatives.

As a comparatively raw graduate of the Faculty of Agriculture, I frequently found it hard to convince a client that he had any use for me or that an agricultural extension service could be in any way helpful to the man on the land.

Things have changed a good deal since those days. The farmer is something of a scientist himself, and the agricultural extension worker is very much in demand. In the pastoral regions an extension service is very much more difficult to provide. Population is scattered, transport is difficult, and people cannot easily be brought together. For these same reasons, an extension service is all the more necessary because the station people have but little opportunity of meeting each other and profiting by each other’s experiences.
The North-West Branch was inaugurated a few years ago for the purpose of coordinating formerly isolated Departmental projects in our North, and of developing a sound agricultural approach to the requirements of this country.

It is a country which abounds with problems; problems which are difficult to solve; difficult even to define; and difficult to place in order of importance.

RESEARCH IN THE KIMBERLEYS

For this reason, research and extension must go hand in hand so that science and practical experience may be brought together as frequently and as intimately as possible.

In East Kimberley we have the Kimberley Research Station. Here the research programme is shared with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization, and is primarily
directed toward the possibility of establishing an irrigation settlement on the Ord River. Agricultural Adviser Fitzgerald has had headquarters at this station and has taken a good deal of information on irrigation practices to stations throughout the Kimberleys. His contribution can be seen to best effect in the West Kimberley where a number of stations with sources of irrigation water have been able to profit considerably from the service he has provided. Mr. Fitzgerald has accepted an appointment with the Northern Territory Administration. He will be greatly missed by those who knew him in Kimberley, but I hasten to advise them that another officer will be along to continue the good work.

In West Kimberley, Cattle Adviser Grant Smith is working hard to obtain reliable grazing figures for cattle under range conditions, and to demonstrate the economics of mineral supplements. It's a hard battle for one seeking to improve the cattle industry, because thousands of miles of fencing is required to enable reasonable control of stocking, and at £150 per mile this takes the project rather beyond the scope and means of the agricultural worker.

**TROPICAL AGRICULTURE**

At Carnarvon, the Gascoyne Research Station has been, until recently, concerned with tropical fruit culture. Agrostologist Dr. B. Rumich has now made it his No. 1 Plant Introduction Centre, and we feel it will play an important part in future as a testing ground for introduced species which may have an important bearing on pastoral area carrying capacity.

For years there has been talk of lucerne as a commercial crop for the Carnarvon plantation area. There is certainly a de-
mand for it in the North, and it enjoys some advantage over bananas and beans in the way of lower water and labour requirements. Largely as a result of Dr. Rumich's advice and encouragement, we now have a group of interested growers and no doubts at all as to their future success.

Working from the same centre, Agricultural Adviser Suijdendorp has embarked on one of the most difficult lines of investigation—the management of spinifex pastures. Having commenced with a botanical study of the area he is already something of an authority on local sheep feeds, and the feeding habits of the animals grazing those areas. Now, with a number of kangaroo-proofed enclosures, he is studying and recording the sheep carrying capacity of spinifex under several different systems of grazing and management. Once again, results will come slowly, but I am convinced that some worthwhile contributions to enlightened station management are on the way.

It is rather a disappointment that at this stage, I am unable to point to an active programme in the mulga zone.

Fig. 5.—Spinifex management trials at Woodstock Station in the Port Hedland hinterland. The area is fenced against kangaroos

IN THE SPINIFEX COUNTRY

The Government-owned stations Abydos and Woodstock, 100 miles inland from Port Hedland, are now the centre for a combined attack on vermin problems. The Agricultural Protection Board, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization and the North-West Branch are pooling resources in an endeavour to throw some light on the dingo and kangaroo menace.

Between the 1952 and 1953 shearings, sheep numbers on 22 stations decreased by a total of 30,000. Of these losses an unknown proportion would be due to direct killings by dogs. For the balance we can blame the kangaroo because he has eaten out the country to the extent that low lambing percentages and high lamb mortality are quite unavoidable, even on the best-managed stations.

Spectacular results are not to be expected in this field but there is no doubt that vermin present a very serious problem in the management of this country, and a concentrated effort by all concerned is urgently warranted.

Fig. 6.—An experimental area of spinifex on Abydos Station, Port Hedland district. It is fenced to exclude sheep, but to permit grazing by kangaroos. Soft spinifex in the left foreground is eaten down while woolly spinifex is untouched.

Twenty years ago our North-West areas carried five million sheep, which was 50 per cent. of the State's sheep population. Now they carry three million, which is about 25 per cent. of the present population. The increase in agricultural area numbers is principally due to improved pastures and improved methods, and for these the achievements of agricultural research workers are largely responsible. While this has been going on, the pastoral areas have been going backward, and huge areas are threatened with soil erosion as a direct result of uncontrolled overgrazing by both sheep and kangaroos.
The mulga region is by far the largest and most important of our pastoral regions from a wool-producing point of view, and it is here that our most energetic attack on the problem of declining sheep numbers should be made.

In conclusion, may I say that we are keen to hear from pastoralists who are interested in our activities. Contact can be made direct with the worker concerned, or by letter addressed to me at the Department of Agriculture, Perth. We are anxious to contact as many station people as possible, and it can help a lot if we know who is interested and in what particular problem.

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**A REMINDER**

HAVE you registered your orchard? One fruit tree or a single vine is an orchard for the purposes of the Plant Diseases Act and must be registered accordingly. The registration fee for less than one acre of trees or vines is 2s. Apply Department of Agriculture, Perth.

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