

Chair's Report:

Modern Outback Forum - The Outback goes to Canberra

Outback Australia requires long-term policies and solutions that are designed to meet its unique needs; involve and sustain local people; and value its nature and economies. This was the resounding theme at the Modern Outback forum held at Parliament House in Canberra in March. Both Mary-Anne Healy and I attended, along with representatives from across the rangelands.

The Australian outback covers nearly three quarters of the continent but supports only about 800,000 residents – less than five per cent of the Australian population. Its 'boom and bust' climate, nature of its land tenures, demographics, agricultural systems, and resource-based economies are fundamentally different to those of the rest of Australia. However, those differences are often not well understood by decision makers.

Coordinated by Rangelands NRM Alliance and Pew Charitable Trusts, the Modern Outback forum was held to raise the profile of the outback and to urge that its distinct identity must be realised if policies are to be successfully implemented in the region.

Attended by about 70 delegates, the forum responded to a number of challenges facing today's Australian outback including extremes of wealth and poverty; a lack of long-term regional jobs and development; fewer land managers; declining ecological health; and poor and sometimes declining social and economic conditions, particularly amongst Aboriginal communities.

The forum was opened by Minister for Regions, Senator Fiona Nash while local Member for Grey Rowan Ramsay joined a panel discussion with other outback MPs Warren Snowdon (Labor), Mark Coulton (Nationals), and Rachel Siewert (Greens). Speakers at the forum covered an array of issues from rangelands policy spoken by Fred Chaney and Tom Calma, followed by panels considering Healthy Country, Political Insight and Healthy Communities.

Wearing several hats – Cordillo Downs pastoralist, OBE beef producer and South Australia Arid Lands NRM Board Presiding Member – Janet Brook was on the Healthy Country Panel. *"The outback regions of Australia contribute significantly to our national economy through our various industries – mining, tourism and pastoralism – but our small population often means we don't have the influence we should have when it comes to shaping national policies and our future."* She said. *"People tend to do things to us, not with us and it's important the outback states and territories pull together for critical mass to influence both the policy agenda and where funding is directed – whether that be in the area of health, education, technology and natural resources management."*

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Mark O'Brien
Chair
South West NRM Board

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Another SA Arid Lands local took part in the forum with Jenny Cleary joining the Healthy Communities panel; Jenny is Chair of Regional Development Australia Far North and also chairs the Deputy Prime Minister's Regional Reference Group. A cross-sector Outback network will be developed to continue the push for better acceptance and integration of rangeland issues by the country's decision makers.

The Rangelands NRM Alliance will be involved in its development to keep natural resources management issues at the forefront.



Above: Mary-Anne Healy (CEO, South West NRM), The Honourable Fred Chaney AO, and Mark O'Brien (Chair, South West NRM)



Above: The Healthy Country panel – Mark Stafford-Smith (CSIRO) speaking with Andrew Drysdale (Chair, Rangeland NRM Alliance), Barry Trail (Director, Pew Charitable Trusts) and Janet Brook (South Australia Arid Lands NRM Board Presiding Member).

A Modern Outback:

Read more about the notion of a Modern Outback in this report by Barry Traill and John Woinarski from Pew Charitable Trusts:



<http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2014/10/the-modern-outback>