Extension

EPPALOCK in 1960 presented the Soil Conservation Authority with a unique challenge in soil conservation extension. Although there was the opportunity of undertaking a major soil conservation programme on a whole catchment basis, the Authority was also faced with some definite handicaps in undertaking this large works programme and associated extension activities.

Compared with other areas in Victoria with similar environment and farming enterprises, the northern portion of the Eppalock catchment was lacking in the development of improved pastures and adoption of soil conservation practices. Farm productivity was low, especially on soils derived from Ordovician sandstones and mudstones.

The catchment project itself was also to some degree "forced" on the district as a result of the Government's decision that the dual soil/water conservation projects must proceed simultaneously.

In this particular situation, the Authority has to adopt an approach to erosion control which was foreign to its philosophy. Because of the urgent necessity to control erosion and consequent siltation of the reservoir, erosion control works had to be undertaken ahead of catchment improvement work.

Over a large part of the eroded portion of the catchment, landholders did not live on their properties, and many owned scattered blocks. There were also a number of part-time farmers who depended on the Heathcote firewood industry, contract work, shearing, and labouring on other farms, to provide income to develop their own properties.

The Authority required the co-operation of individual landholders and the whole district. For the commencement of this project the successful accomplishment of its objectives, much area was needed in planning and carrying out the extension programme.

Authority officers had had some previous contact with a few key landholders in the catchment during the late 1940's and 1950's. From the previous contact and assistance given, something was known of the Authority's aims and attitudes, and it started with a good image.

The District Conservation Officer (left) in charge of the project discusses soil conservation plans with one of the leading landholders in the district who is a member of the Eppalock Catchment Committee

Because of the importance of this project, and despite shortage of staff, the Authority selected a planning and supervising team of four officers, who concentrated on the project work, unencumbered by other routine duties.

At the first public meeting much thought had been given to informing the landholders and district people of the Authority's objectives, procedures, and type of works programmes to be adopted, and the degree to which land holders would be involved in the scheme.

Two further public meetings were held at intervals, at each of which separate specially produced color/sound films of the project were shown to large audiences of participating landholders who were invited to raise any questions they desired.

An Eppalock Catchment committee was established, comprised of representatives of Shire Councils within the catchment, local members of the three statutory District Soil Conservation advisory committees covering the catchment, and the Authority's Deputy Chairman.

This committee has met regularly and it is a useful means of keeping local authorities informed of the progress of the project or any problems encountered. Also, the Authority calls on the committee for advice and assistance as problems arise, particularly those involving individual landholders or Shire Councils.

Eppalock is the most significant soil conservation project in Victoria, because of its unique history and role in catchment protection, and also because it directly resulted in Group Conservation Area legislation in Victoria. Many important interstate and overseas visitors have inspected the project. The State Governor, Premier, several State Ministers, and a Parliamentary Select Committee have also inspected and shown particular interest and pride in the soil conservation achievements at Eppalock.

Every opportunity has been taken to publicise the visits, and it is considered that this has assisted in reminding local people of the significance of the project and their important role in it.

SCA – Landholder Co-operation

There are several important aspects which are considered in achieving the high degree of land holder co-operation.

Wherever possible, S. C. A. officers have been allocated specific sub-catchments for planning and supervision. This was done to ensure each officer developed a good knowledge of those properties and their owners, and thus provide a personal extension service.

As planning proceeded, each project officer endeavoured to include landholders in discussions on planning of both productive and non-productive works. In this way, the landholder feels he has a real part in planning of works for his property, particularly such items as pasture improvement, subdivision fences, and stock water supply. The officer also gains from the owner's local knowledge and some knowledge of his aims for property development and management.

It was fortunate that prior to 1960, several problems associated with successful pasture improvement on this difficult hill country had been solved.

The use of this chisel seeder for a "one hit" method of pasture sowing had been proved successful and economic by a few local landholders. The Department of Agriculture has determined by local pasture trials, that a lime-superphosphate mixture plus the trace element molybdenum were necessary for good clover establishment. Aerial top-dressing had proved a practical and economic means of applying maintenance fertilizer dressings. Also, myxomatosis and "1080" poisoning has arrived to counter the serious rabbit problem.

The Authority's chisel seeding programme, both by financial assistance for certain land classes, and by arranging for contractors to carry out the work each autumn, proved highly successful in reducing runoff and improving farm productivity. It provides an avenue for regular farmer contact by S. C. A. officers in the paddock, which has proved a most appropriate place for successful achievement of agricultural extension. It also gave Authority officers splendid opportunity to assist landholders with planning farm subdivision and stock water supplies.

During the early years of planning, it was noticeable that, many properties in the northern parts of the catchment were inadequately provided for stock water. The difficult clay subsoils which are prone to tunnel erosion, require particular care to be taken with construction of farm dams.

It was found, particularly in the drought years of 1967-68, that with improved pastures, increased stocking rates and particularly, increased cattle numbers, stock water supplies were inadequate.

In the Eppalock Catchment Project, there has been a steady demand for advice and survey assistance for farm dams. By involvement with farm water supply, S. C. A. officers have demonstrated to local contractors the value of good design and construction techniques, and most contractors working in the project now seek Authority advice and survey assistance for their work.

A close liaison has been established between local officers of other Departments and S. C. A. staff. Department of Agricultural officers recognize the important task the Authority has in this project, and they have willingly assisted, especially in providing pasture sowing recommendations and investigation pasture establishment problems as they arise.

The Authority joined with the Department of Agriculture and the Heathcote Agricultural and Pastoral Society in establishing a Sheep Stocking Rate/Fertilizer Trial at Mia Mia. This trial has proved a most useful extension medium, and because of their association with it, sheep and wool officers and agrostologists have gained the friendship and confidence of local landholders. This has also provided them with opportunity to visit local properties and advise owners on the vital subjects of pasture utilization and stock management.

As experience was gained in the project, and as landholders demonstrated their eagerness to co-operate, the Authority was prepared to change its approach to certain aspects of its planning and recommendations made to landholders.

One important change was the battering and sowing down of active gullies in association with chisel seeding where it was considered safe, and where landholders were prepared to share the cost of this partly productive work.

An improved design for protective fencing was adopted early in the life of the project, which has resulted in less maintenance worry for landholders.

The Future?

Soil conservation work in the Eppalock Catchment Project represents a Government investment of over $1 million.

The Authority has a continuing responsibility to ensure that this investment is safeguarded and that landholders are playing their part to ensure that stable catchment conditions are maintained.

Following a period of three years from construction of works in each planned sub-catchment, landholders become responsible for maintenance.

A major extension challenge faces the Authority to ensure that landholders face up to this vital maintenance responsibility. This includes maintenance of all structural works, effective rabbit control, maintenance of adequate fertilizer applications on sown pastures, and wise management of pastures.

To gain full benefit from utilization of the improved pastures, and to offset lower wool prices and higher costs, more intensive management will be necessary. Both S. C. A. and Department of Agriculture extension officers will have an important role in servicing this need.

Accurate surveying for contour works and structures is required in the Catchment.

Lake Eppalock – Recreation

A most important by product of the creation of Lake Eppalock is its popularity for recreation. Its central location in Victoria, close proximity to Melbourne and Bendigo, and its scenic and readily accessible foreshores enhance its value for public enjoyment.

Three Recreational Area Management committees have been established by the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission to develop and maintain these foreshores. A soil conservation officer has been appointed to each committee, which is comprised of Shire Council representatives, local departmental officers, and a government nominee.