

SPREADING THE GRASSLAND MESSAGE -EXPERIENCES
FROM THE NEW ZEALAND GRASSLAND ASSOCIATION

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A grassland society/association is mainly concerned with the communication of research results, new developments, experiences and the latest opinions on matters which may lead to improved farm practices. This communication can be readily achieved by holding regular conferences in different regions, during which participants consider, see and discuss developments and problems in the pastoral industry. Such meetings must be a two-way process of communication, visitors learning about the region hosting the conference, and the regional participants learning from the visitors. The conference is also an ideal opportunity for discussion and socialising among grassland enthusiasts.

The New Zealand Grassland Association has gained experience of such communication over 55 years and has held 50 conferences (including 2 special-purpose meetings). In this paper, we intend to use this experience to illustrate some effective pathways for the Grassland Society of New South Wales to communicate in its future activities, so that it enjoys as much success as its trans-Tasman counterpart.

The New Zealand Grassland Association is the largest scientific body of its type in New Zealand. We shall discuss the reasons for its success in the following sections.

Development

The New Zealand Grassland Association was formed in 1931 when the country's economy was extremely depressed. The first conference was held during August 1931, with 28 members attending. They saw an increasing need for more research and advice on grassland farming. Themes discussed included pasture development and intensification, strains of pasture plants, topdressing and management. The first farmer paper was presented at the second conference in 1933, and farmer papers have been a regular feature since.

Alternation of conference venue between North and South Islands developed into a regular pattern during the 1930's, initially between the agricultural research centres Palmerston North and Christchurch, but since 1937 all regions of NZ have been visited.

The founding members of the Association included several prominent leaders of the country's pastoral industry. A.H. Cockayne led its early development and was President until 1948, his annual addresses sometimes being broadcast over radio. Sir E. Bruce Levy gave the first paper at the inaugural conference

and remained an active participant until well after his retirement in 1951. Eleven of the foundering members were still members in 1954, and not until Sir Bruce Levy's death in November 1985 was the last link to 1931 ended.

Membership

Membership of the New Zealand Grassland Association has varied (Fig. 1). It grew rapidly during the 1930's and after World War II. A buoyant pastoral industry during the early 1950's was reflected in attendance at annual conferences. Up to 700 attended the 1952 conference in Timaru. After 1954 there was a gradual decline in total membership to around 500, conference attendance being usually 200-300. However, during the past decade a new enthusiasm has seen membership rise to new levels, total numbers having more than trebled since the mid 70's. This is a result of efforts by Executive Committee members to rationalise activities, try new means of communication, publicise NZGA activities and publications, and to highlight major developments and problems in NZ agriculture. In recent years conference attendance has been consistently over 400 and new members joining at the Annual Conferences have retained their membership long after the conference has visited their region. Maintenance of low membership fees and low publication costs, yet production of quality publications, has retained those who appreciate value for money.

The Association's strength has always been its mixture of members from all sectors of the pastoral industry (Table 1). The participation of farmers has always been high, and this has led the Association to its format of presenting technical information combined with practical application. While percentage of each sector in membership is affected primarily by numbers per sector, it is of interest that recently recruitment of students who are the future of the industry, has been particularly high (Table 2).

Conferences

The New Zealand Grassland Association has always centred around its Annual Conference, which settled into a regular format soon after its inception. A 3 day meeting is held every spring, rotating around the pasture regions. The members can thus experience the major features of pastoral farming in each region, which is reflected to the Conference Proceedings, so that over the years, the range of the grassland industry is covered, and published, as a comprehensive overview of the national effort.

In recent years, the conference has become a "sandwich" event, mixing items to maintain interest. The official opening is normally held on the first evening, and includes a mayoral welcome, the President's address and a guest speaker. On the morning of the first full day, a session of spoken papers presented by local advisers, researchers and farmers covers

recent trends in the host regions's grassland farming, followed by a session on a topic of local importance, to stimulate local participation in discussion. The conference concludes with a final day of spoken and poster papers. The Conference Dinner is the main social event, encouraging inter-sector contact.

Spoken papers are 10-20 minutes long, and are rigorously controlled for timing using warning lights. Sessions are presented on each main theme, with adequate time for questions and answers after every or every other paper, enabling some discussion to develop. Paper sessions are interspersed with a day's field tour, or 2 half-day afternoon tours. Recent conferences have added a session of technical poster presentations, usually held on the third (last) day, so that participants have ample time to study displays before discussing aspects with the authors, and with each other, during the poster session.

Use of new techniques

Recent conferences have featured several innovations for improved communication. Instead of the traditional one day field tour around the region, a choice of dairying or hill country farming was offered during the 1981 conference (New Plymouth). In 1983, two afternoon tours (one inland and the second to the north) was organised for the Gisborne Conference. A 1985 innovation during the Northland Conference field tour was a lunch stop with choice of poster presentations at DSIR's Grasslands Division regional centre, Kaikohe.

The incorporation of a technical poster session since 1983 (Gisborne), and a forum on a topic of particular interest (Blenheim, 1982) has added variety to paper sessions. In 1967 a farmer member started the annual presentation of an award for the most interesting and best presented paper, a move which markedly improved oral and visual presentation.

In 1981, publication of a digest booklet, containing popular summaries of conference papers, for participants and publicity purposes, stimulated discussion of papers and public awareness of conference topics and activities.

Discussion is a most important ingredient of conference activity, yet it is frequently neglected. Time designated for topic discussion can be easily eroded by ineffective timing of spoken papers and poor chairmanship by session leaders. Recent means of stimulating discussion at NZGA grassland conferences have included the grouping of spoken papers with panel discussion periods, and the allocation of some time for introductory comments. Possibilities for the future include workshop discussions in small groups, and the application of a modified Delphi technique, as used by the Australian Wool Corporation during their symposium on pasture production and utilisation at Leura, NSW during December 1985.

Local organisation

In addition to the National Executive Committee, NZGA also forms a local organising committee, composed of enthusiastic volunteers from within the host region. Formed 18 months before the conference, this local team arranges reservation of venue and accommodation, some meals, the field tour and transport, sponsorship for the conference budget, and helps to develop the main themes for the conference sessions.

A representative of the local committee attends National Executive meetings and communicates between these teams. Sporadic meetings are held locally, up to and after the conference. National Executive meetings are held in December, March, July and just before the Conference, when both teams work together to ensure smooth running.

Publicity

Planned campaigns to improve industry awareness have been undertaken in recent years. Results in the form of increased membership, publication sales and conference attendance have been most worthwhile. Circulation of press releases to the media, interviews on rural radio programmes, and encouragement to attend conferences are the main means of promotion, undertaken by appointed executive personnel.

Publications

While those attending the conference experience the papers, posters and regional practices first-hand, all members, and subscribing libraries, agencies and institutions around the world receive the published Conference Proceedings. Prepared by authors and an editorial panel, all papers are given equal status in print, and the volume is published within 3 months of the conference. Quality of publication and price are balanced by careful selection of quotation from local printers.

The NZ Grassland Association has also published a Research and Practice Series of handbooks, proceeding of conferences held in addition to the annual meeting, which concentrate of special subjects, such as herbage seed production and the use of herbage cultivars. Yet another recent innovation is the publication of reprint handbooks, each covering a particular subject by printing a collection of selected papers from the past decade's conferences. Though the latter are financially supported by sponsoring agricultural companies, the publications are all held at minimal prices, and are readily purchased by all sectors of the farming industry, in New Zealand and in many other countries.

In presenting some major aspect of NZGA activities and organisation, we hope to stimulate the development of the Grassland Society of New South Wales along the most positive and fruitful pathways. The formation of this Society comes at a

time when the pastoral industries of Australia and New Zealand are depressed. Despite these current problems, the future of pastoral farming is good, particularly when based on a cost-effective legume-based system which makes biological sense. Those individuals who are receptive to new ideas and have an ability to put them into practice, will lead the pastoral industry back into prosperity. It is hoped that such people will form the basis of the Grassland Society of New South Wales.

Table 1 Membership composition of the New Zealand Grassland Association during 1950-1986 (% members in each occupation).

<u>Sector</u>	<u>1950</u>	<u>1954</u>	<u>1969</u>	<u>1981</u>	<u>1986</u>
Farmers	33	61	46	52	50
Extension, university and research	45	22	37	35	36
Commerce	12	11	16	12	9
Students	0	0	0	0	4
Others	10	6	1	1	1
TOTAL MEMBERSHIP	268	784	540	1022	1450

Table 2 Recruitment composition of the New Zealand Grassland Association during 1982-1986

<u>Sector</u>	<u>Number of new members</u>	<u>%</u>
Farmers	254	37
Advisory	65	9
Research	94	14
University	21	3
Students	167	24
Commerce	86	12
Others	8	1

Fig 1 Membership of the New Zealand Grassland Association since World War II (insufficient data available during 1931-1947).

