

By **MATTHEW CAWOOD**

LAND degradation and declining productivity is "pulling the plug" on many rural communities, Mark Alchin says.

So why not use carbon trading to rebuild them?

Dr Alchin, a rangelands ecologist with the WA Department of Agriculture and Food (DAFWA), told the Rural Consulting Service's 20th Anniversary Conference in Brisbane this week that since white settlement, Australians had drawn down on "natural capital" to create the food and fibre that underpins the nation's prosperity.

He argued that "carbon capital" was a historic opportunity to complete the loop, by providing a financial incentive to restore the ecological health of degraded rangelands and so re-establish the basis for profitable agriculture.

Dr Alchin earned his doctorate studying grazing systems in outback WA. About 30 per cent of the state's rangelands – more than 20 million hectares – he describes as "commercially and ecologically bankrupt".

These degraded zones can either be locked up – currently the preferred strategy for government land managers – or be subject to management that aims to lift soil carbon levels.

That can mean time-controlled grazing management or, in the north, cutting back on savannah burning.

Locking land up often doesn't work, in Dr Alchin's opinion, unless the ecological community is already relatively intact.

Otherwise, "degradation is cancerous". Locking up badly degraded land only allows the cancer to take a firmer grip.

Capturing carbon



ABOVE, LEFT: The Pensini family of Cheela Plains Station.

But Dr Alchin believes that carbon trading provides a historic opportunity for landholders to get hold of the capital they need to reverse the rundown of the past century or so.

His statement is supported by the results of the Carbon Capture Project, a joint effort between DAFWA and the Federal Government to assess the carbon sequestration potential of rangelands as in the Cheela Plains Station example.

The project considered not only soil carbon, but all the carbon under management – in trees and shrubs, grasses, dead timber and plant litter.

At the 188,000ha Cheela Plains

Station in the west Pilbara, the project looked at the effects of fully destocking the property or using rest-based grazing, compared to a scenario of ongoing set stocking at 30 per cent pasture utilisation.

Destocked, the property would lose carbon, the project's researchers decided, because it would be vulnerable to more frequent and hotter fires.

Under rest-based grazing management, the property would gain 1.1t CO₂-e compared to set stocking – a modest amount. But this could be lifted substantially if the landholder chose to focus on the most profitable areas instead of the entire property.

point was about 61 tonnes CO₂-e.

At a conservative \$10/tonne for carbon, that difference translates to about \$40/hectare per year greater carbon returns over 15 years in the degraded area, because the undegraded area is already near its carbon storage capacity.

Gross margins on cattle on this station are around \$3/ha/year.

The message to would-be carbon farmers, Dr Alchin said, was to carefully pick the areas you wanted to do your sequestering in for optimum carbon returns, and for the benefits that would accrue if the area was restored to ecological health.

Even though the only market currently available is voluntary, Dr Alchin said it provided adequate incentives to start.

If the intention of carbon sequestration was rangelands restoration, it also developed greater market appeal as "charismatic carbon" – carbon that has a further ecological benefit as well as lessening the greenhouse effect.

Heritage hails Ag Show decade

THIS year, the 2010 Heritage Ag Show in Toowoomba will mark the 10th anniversary of an outstanding partnership that continues to deliver the goods for the people of rural and regional Queensland.

And it is the 10th consecutive year that Heritage Building Society has been the naming rights sponsor for the Ag Show.

Heritage Building Society chief executive officer John Minz (pictured) said it had been a great partnership between Australia's largest building society and Queensland's biggest machinery field day and technology event.

The Heritage Ag Show, billed as 'tomorrow's technology today' will be held over three days from August 31 to September 2 at the Toowoomba Showgrounds.

Mr Minz said supporting this event was one way the Society looked to contribute to the strength of our rural



and regional communities.

"Our sponsorship of the Ag Show certainly delivers on that commitment."

Mr Minz said the Heritage Ag Show was an important event for many

thousands of primary producers and suppliers each year and a catalyst for increased productivity and development in the rural sector.

"This is a great chance to showcase the best products, services and supplies on the market and for producers to find out how they can take advantage of them to improve their operations," he said.

"As well Heritage was proudly born and bred on the Darling Downs and our

ongoing success had its foundations in the support we received from the people of those areas.

"We have now built on those foundations to become Australia's largest building society and to provide services to people all over the country.

"But with our long history and understanding of the needs of people in regional and rural communities, we are well placed to continue providing the banking products and services they require.

"We also have a strong and continuing commitment to support the development of those communities.

"Heritage is proud to help bring those elements together through our sponsorship of this great event."

Mr Minz encouraged Ag Show visitors to visit the Heritage stand to find out more about how the Society could help them with personal banking needs and a full suite of products for commercial and agribusiness.

AGED CARE NURSING SCHOLARSHIPS UNDERGRADUATE

DO YOU HAVE A COMMITMENT TO AGED CARE?

Australian Government funded scholarships are now available for Australian citizens or permanent residents who:

- Are interested in or currently working in the aged care sector.
- Are currently studying or want to study an accredited undergraduate course in an Australian university to become a registered nurse/division one nurse.

Applications close 10 September 2010



Australian Government
Department of Health and Ageing

RCNA, Australia's peak professional nursing organisation, is proud to partner the Australian Government as the fund administrator for this program.

For more information on eligibility or how to apply for a scholarship:



RCNA | freecall: 1800 116 696
scholarships@rcna.org.au
www.rcna.org.au

AUSTRALIANS ON KUBOTA

KUBOTA RTV900 UTILITY VEHICLE

Test drive and order a Kubota* for your chance to win a new RTV900 utility vehicle!

120th anniversary

To arrange a test drive contact

Kubota mowers, tractors and utility vehicles only.

Test drive models subject to availability. WIN a RTV900 details at kubota.com.au. Conditions apply.

Kubota
For Earth, For Life