

Soil Conservation District Advisory Committees

(compiled by Greg Sheehan)

District Advisory Committees (DAC's) were established by the Authority to "*consider and report to the Authority upon any matter relating to land utilization or soil erosion or conservation within its district*" either on its own account or if asked by the Authority.

Each DAC was to consist of not more than seven members, of whom one would represent the Authority and one or two others would represent allied government departments or public authorities relevant to each district. The rest of the committee would represent grazing, agricultural or other relevant interests.

Each Soil Conservation District was divided into subdivisions, usually based on Shire boundaries, and landholder representative elected from each subdivision. The appointments were for three years, and members could seek re-election, which many did and served for long periods.

The Authority adopted the principle of appointing a committee only after the appointment of a District Conservation Officer and after they had become well established and recognised in the district.

DAC meetings were normally held every three to four months and usually consisted of an inspection followed by the meeting. When an inspection was scheduled, landholder members were sometimes encouraged to bring along another landholder.

The minutes of DAC meetings were punctually sent to the Authority, who provided a response to any resolutions made by the Committees. Many of the DAC meetings were attended by the Authority Member who had a special interest in the role of DAC's.

During the period 1950 to 1970, twenty three DAC's were established, and these continued on until mid-1982, when a restructure of DAC's was carried out resulting in a reduction in their numbers from 23 to 17 in order to conform with the new regional boundaries.

The DAC changes made in 1982 were as follows:

Avoca River and Campaspe	Avoca/Campaspe
Bogong High Plains	Alpine
Central, Upper Loddon, Pyrenees	East Central and West Central
Southern Gippsland, Western Gippsland	Gippsland
Avon, Tambo	East Gippsland

Ovens, Lower Goulburn, Upper Murray	Goulburn/Ovens and Ovens/Murray
Southern Wimmera	Glenelg
Eastern Mallee, Western Mallee	Southern Mallee

Around 300 landholders served on the DAC's, with many of them contributing over twenty years' service. There have only been two women on a DAC – Mrs J I Symons on the Lower Goulburn and Ms A H Teese on the East Central.

As well as the normal district meetings, DAC's held State and Regional Conferences from time to time. State Conferences were held in 1952, 1956, 1961, 1966 and 1970.

DAC Conference Kew City Hall 25-26 July 1961.

Thirty two farmer delegates representing sixteen Committees attended and submitted thirty two agenda items ranging from grazing control in high mountain country to the use of prefabricated structures in gully head erosion control.

A resolution at the conference that the national importance of soil conservation is such that a greater allocation of funds to the Soil Conservation Authority is warranted will be referred to the Hon K Turnbull, the newly appointed Minister for Conservation.

This was the third such conference to be held. At the conference, during debate on the value of the Authority film night, Central DAC Member Fred Grimwade commented that generally the standard of the films was not good, and you could not get people to second rate halls to watch second rate films. He believed that far more value would be obtained from discussion groups and talking over problems.

One of the more unusual motions at the Conference came from the Upper Murray DAC which proposed that "this Conference consider the question of Civil Defence and its application to soil conservation practices. Speaking to the motion Mr Fraser explained the dangers of a nuclear war and in particular the damage it would cause to the soil. He suggested that when the DAC's returned home they should contact their local Councils on this subject. Alex Mitchell, then Principal Research Officer, outlined technical details of the problems of nuclear war and its effects.

The motion was noted by the Conference, but in its response to the Conference motions, the Authority indicated that it intends to appoint its own committee to investigate the role the Authority may be able to play in the event of nuclear war.

Another item for discussion was in regard to indiscriminate gravel stripping for roadmaking and lack of reclamation with its consequent risk of erosion. The Conference urged the Authority to amend the SC&LU Act to give it more control over gravel stripping.

DAC's Conference Woodbury House Bendigo 12-13 July 1966.

In opening the 1966 Conference at Woodbury House in Bendigo, the Minister for Conservation, the Hon JCM Balfour stated *"while he had been able to have a close contact with the Authority members, his duties as a Minister had prevented him from gaining an opportunity to meet the people directly interested in soil conservation. He was glad of the opportunity to now rectify that situation."*

In 1950 the total staff of the Authority amounted to a Secretary, two Typists, Chief Conservation Officer, 11 Field Officers, Surveyor, Research Officer and Engineer. Only four officers were stationed in the country at that time. The total expenditure in the first year of operations was about \$50,000.

Although not sufficient to cope with the rapidly increasing demand for service, the Authority today has staff of nine Administrative Officers, 16 Typists, 62 Professional and Sub-professional Officers in the Field Division, 18 Research Officers, 15 Engineers and Draughtsmen, three in Publications & Information and 38 casual ancillary staff. Expenditure for the year just ended was about \$1 million.

The District Advisory Committees have played a significant role in the development of the Authority during the past 16 years. In 1950, the Lower Goulburn, Pyrenees and Avoca River Committees, and shortly after the Bogong High Plains Committee were constituted and now this number has increased to 21.

It is interesting to note that several of the representatives attending today were members of the original Committees established in 1950 and they have given continuous service to the community in this capacity since then. They are:

Cr A W Jones Upper Goulburn

Mr R B Gray Avoca River

Cr A G Holden Pyrenees

Mr T A Richardson Pyrenees

Mr F H Boatman Pyrenees

Mr J F Roper Bogong High Plains

Although some Committees in the early days found it a little difficult to see how and to what extent they could assist the Authority, the role of all Committees has become clearer with the passing of time and with the increased need for them to exercise their functions in accordance with the statutes. The initiation of the Group Conservation Areas provided an even more definitive role for the Committees which they have exercised with a commendable degree of responsibility, but even prior to

this development, Committees had been helpful in many aspects of the Authority's work.

He felt sure that the collective wisdom of landholder members concerning some of the practical aspects of farming in their area had been of great assistance to the young officers which the Authority had stationed in their districts from time to time.

In addition, the Committees and their individual members had assisted in providing the basic idea of conservation in the community and they had assisted the Authority in its efforts in this respect by assisting with Hanslow Cup Competitions, Field Days, Film Tours and other similar educational activities. They had introduced new Authority officers to local landholders and to officers of the local Shire Councils.

The departmental members of the Committees had assisted with their own particular professional knowledge and no doubt within their own departments they have been able to promulgate to advantage, current ideas on soil conservation and land-use.

There was no doubt that in the original Soil Conservation and Land Utilization Act it was intended that the Committee should act as the liaison between the Authority and the landholders and to some extent as a buffer if and when the Authority chose to use some of its powers of compulsion.

The fact that the Authority has not chosen to use these powers except as a last resort has meant that the need to act as a buffer against unwarranted use of powers has not been required. In fact, it appeared that the Authority has been able to adhere to its policy for much longer than it might have done simply because the Committees were available to act on its behalf to convince unwilling and perhaps irresponsible landholders. I know that some Committees think that compulsion should be used more readily in some circumstances, but I am sure that as landholders themselves, they would appreciate and endorse the policy of the Authority in doing everything possible to achieve willing co-operation."

An agenda item from this conference proposed by the Avoca River DAC was that consideration be given to the formation of a Victorian Soil Conservation Association – a group of landholders and professional soil conservationists interested in the furtherance of soil conservation in Victoria.

While no resolution was taken on this matter, it would take another twenty years for such an association to be formed, following the abolition of the SCA.

DAC Conference Head Office Kew August 1970

In welcoming the 70 delegates to the Conference, the Chairman Mr R G Downes said

"That at the moment there was popular interest in conservation generally which could be turned to the Authority's advantage if it went about it in the right way.

He said it was not belittling those particular areas of conservation which had popular appeal at present but that an attempt should be made to show that soil conservation was part of the rational use of Victoria's resources. He added that primary producers were facing several problems at the moment, such as the cost-price squeeze and shrinking markets because of adverse conditions in other countries. He felt that in these circumstances, the Authority could make an excellent case for soil conservation in the present situation to the extent that landholders should be encouraged not to impair the productive capacity of the land.

One of the items discussed at this conference was a proposal to provide "Co-Operator" signs to landholders in Group Conservation Areas. The signs were to be in shape of the SCA roundel and be made available as gate signs.

The DAC's were not convinced that the cost was warranted as maintenance would be high, due to the signs making ideal shooting targets.

The End for DAC's

In the December 1984 DAC Newsletter, the Chairman Alex Mitchell wrote:

"I regret that this is the last DAC Newsletter that I will be sending out as Chairman of the Soil Conservation Authority as I will be retiring on 15 April 1985 after 34 years with the SCA.

I also advise that Harold Allen, Chief Soil Conservationist, after 25 years with the Authority, has transferred to a position with the Ministry for Tourism.

Until legislation is enacted to amend the Soil Conservation and Land Utilization Act, it is expected that all SCA DACs continue to perform their present role. It is expected that Regional Land Protection Advisory Committees will eventually be set up in all the new regions, replacing the DACs.

We are in a time of great change, with its associated difficulties and opportunities. During this period, our continued effort to encourage the wise use of land is more important than ever.

While you as DAC members, appreciate that the best way to protect productive land is by soil conservation, the challenge is to develop this understanding throughout the whole community.

Let one of your New Year commitments be to promote this stewardship of the land by good husbandry so that it can be handed on to the next generation in good condition"

The DAC's continued to function until about mid 1985 when they were replaced by the Land Protection Advisory System.

In a letter to DAC's in May 1985, Authority Member Tony Plowman letter commented

For the past thirty years the Soil Conservation Authority has been building up a body of knowledge about soil erosion by both wind and water. This process has included the study of water catchments and resultant water quality, dryland salinity, soil types and land mapping and research into the alpine areas. Other areas of involvement have been coastal management

Together with this body of knowledge, three significant factors have developed:

(i) a degree of dedication, rarely found in the public service, by the officers and researchers working in the field and by the staff working in Head Office and around the State;

(ii) the valuable practical involvement of the District Advisory Committees; and

(iii) the strong bond of respect and friendship between Committee members and soil conservation officers.

As part of the amalgamation of State Government Departments, the Soil Conservation Authority is being assimilated into the Department of Conservation Forests and lands, which is in the middle of a major restructuring process.

It is hoped that:

(i) the soil conservationists within the new Department will not lose their identity in the eyes of the clients nor their sense of dedication, which has won them the respect of the farming community;

(ii) the value of the District Advisory Committee members experience and practical involvement will not be lost in the new organisation.

In the Spring Session (1985) of State Parliament it is envisaged that the Soil Conservation and Land Utilization Act will be amended.

When this happens, the Authority will effectively cease to exist and the DACs will no longer be required to fulfil their statutory role. However, until this happens, it is important that the DACs continue to perform their normal functions.

Nominations for the Regional Land Protection Advisory Committees is expected to be called for in June 1985 and I would urge all DAC members who are interested in or concerned about the future role of soil conservation In the Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands to accept nomination to these committees.

As restructuring of the Department has given a great deal of autonomy to Regional Management and this in turn will lead to a greater degree of decision making being done in the region it is certain that the Regional Land Protection Advisory

Committees will perform a very different and in fact much more important role than the SCA DACs have played in the past.

These Committees should have an influence on priorities and management decisions of the Department as they affect the management of private land. These will include soil conservation issues, vermin and noxious weed control and tree growing on private land. They will also include the Department's management policies on public land where they affect private land.

A list of all those people who were involved with DAC's during the time of SCA has been compiled as a separate document in order to recognise the outstanding contribution they have made to soil conservation in Victoria.