



▶▶▶ Importance of grassy ecosystems

Grassy ecosystems consist of the vegetation communities often forgotten but that play a vital role in our economic development and survival.

From fodder for livestock to habitat for beneficial insects, these areas have high values (both economically and environmentally) that need to be protected for the future.

What are grassy ecosystems?

Grassy ecosystems range from grasslands, which have less than 10% tree cover, to grassy woodlands, consisting of a widely spaced tree layer with a grassy understorey. Grasslands are not necessarily just made up of grasses, but can also include a wide variety of native herbs and sedges.



Figure 1: Regenerating poplar box open woodland.

Why do we need to be concerned?

Due to their occurrence on the flatter, fertile parts of the landscape, grassy ecosystems are affected by land clearing for cultivation, meaning current grassy ecosystems are now highly fragmented. In some areas, such as the Darling Downs, grasslands have been cleared down to one per cent of their original area and are under serious threat of disappearing from the landscape altogether.

In other areas, where cultivation may not be viable, the quality of grassy ecosystems can be threatened by tree layer clearance, over-grazing, pasture 'improvement' and weed invasion.



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Why care?

Natural grassy ecosystems contribute a number of vital ecosystem services contributing to sustainable production, landscape processes and ecosystem health.

1. Many native grass species provide palatable and nutritious stock fodder. The diversity in species, and their different characteristics, growth periods and responses (C3 and C4 grasses) has the ability to provide year round nutritious feed
2. The tussock habit of grasses and their deep, fibrous root systems slows down overland water flow and reduces erosion, nutrient runoff and loss of water from the landscape
3. These native vegetation communities require low input and maintenance to remain productive and healthy. They can regenerate by seed or from tussocks and a well managed native pasture will compete strongly and resist weed invasion, eliminating the need for herbicide use. Most natives also do not like high nutrient in the soil therefore fertilizer application is not generally necessary
4. Native species do not have the weed potential of exotic species
5. Fuel hazard is not as high as with some exotic species
6. Grass species are reasonably drought tolerant and resilient
7. Grassy ecosystems provide habitat for plants and animals, including threatened vegetation communities and species

Indicators of good and poor grassland/native pasture condition	
Good condition	Poor condition
Dominant native species is dominant	Wiregrass/ other less desirable species dominant
Diversity of native species	'Monoculture' – few species present
Diversity of forms	Sclerolaena species prevalent
Reasonably dense ground cover	Bare ground patches
Inter-tussock spaces, without senescence.	Dense matting, old foliage.
Weeds/ exotic species not present	Prevalence of weeds

