Route sell-off?

'Set up for the orderly travel of stock'

INTEGRAL PART . . . boss drover Graham Francisco in the ‘long paddock’ near Hughenden

By JOHN ANDERSEN

SELLING off stock routes in Queensland and New South Wales for 13 pieces of silver would have Banjo Paterson spinning in his grave.

Paterson wrote *Clancy of the Overflow*, the story of the Queensland drover, a poem that still spotlights the great divide separating city and bush.

“Clancy’s gone to Queensland droving and we know not where he are,” was its famous refrain.

Yesterday more than 450 ecologists and wildlife scientists called on Queensland Premier Anna Bligh and NSW Premier Morris Iemma to protect the stock route network that was set up in the 19th century to assist in the orderly travel of stock between properties and markets.

But they remain an integral part of rural life and in drought years are often used by graziers to keep their starving cattle alive.

Hence the term, the ‘long paddock’. Drovers walking mobs of cattle are still a common sight along the routes between Townsville and Julia Creek.

The risk of a sell-off follows a report calling for public comment on ways to improve management of the 72,000 kilometre stock route network.

AgForce Queensland spokesman Peter Hall said he was confident the Queensland Government would retain the system.

“AgForce applauds the Queensland Government for continuing to recognise the primary purpose of the route as a network for travelling stock.”

Ray Hopper, the Natural Resources spokesman for Queensland’s LNP, was not convinced.

“I will be calling on both governments not to diminish the stock route network,” he said.

The University of Queensland’s Professor Hugh Possingham was a signatory to the Long Paddock Scientists’ Statement. He said administrative changes threatened the future health and integrity of the vast network that is home to endangered plants and animals.

Last month’s Queensland report called for a user pays system to fund Local Governments that manage stock routes and the division of the network into active and inactive routes with different levels of management.

It backs a previously stated promise by the Bligh government not to sell or lease the route network.