Feral goats

The cost to land and business

A practical guide to understand the impacts of feral goats — and why controlling them is crucial

LANDSCAPE SOUTH AUSTRALIA SA ARID LANDS

Contents

Photo: EP Landscape Board

The growing problem

Feral goats are an agricultural and environmental pest. They compete with livestock and native animals for pasture, move freely through fences and will eat the same species grazed by sheep, to the ground.

While feral goats can be seen as a source of opportunistic income through mustering and sale, this short-term gain masks a much larger environmental problem.

Goats are quietly degrading landscapes, outcompeting livestock, destroying vegetation, and accelerating erosion – all of which lead to declining livestock productivity over time.

Competition and land degradation by feral goats resulted in it listed as a key threatening process under national environmental law in 1994. This listing lead to the development of national threat abatement plans in 1998, 2008 and more recently in 2023.

A review in 2013 found that despite the 2008 plan, feral goat numbers had continued to rise and impacts had not been reduced.

The impact of feral goats has resulted in them being listed as one of the **top five invasive species nationally**.

The threat is considered higher in some parts of South Australia, including in the SA Arid Lands region. Nationally, goats are in the company of rabbits, feral pigs, feral cats and Phytophthora Root Rot.

Recent surveys estimate 350,000-450,000 goats in South Australia and more than 2.6 million feral goats across the continent. This number fluctuates significantly due to factors like drought and management programs.

Feral goats are one of Australia's most destructive and rapidly expanding invasive species. Without control measures, populations can increase by 60-75 per cent annually.

It's time to weigh up the true cost of allowing feral goats to remain on the land.

Responsibilities and expectations for land managers

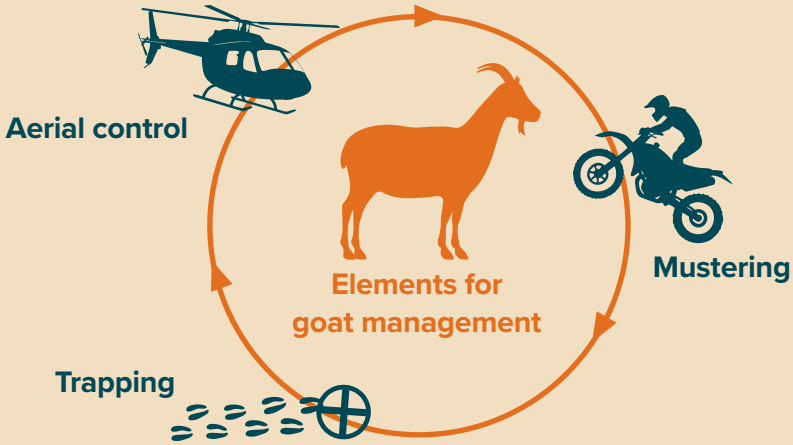
The best form of goat management requires more than one option to control the population. Rather than implement options in isolation, think of a goat control program as a combined strategy.

Legally, landholders must control feral goat populations. This can be done by mustering, ground shooting, aerial control and trapping, or using all options together.

For those mustering, releasing any goats, including those that are too small or large to ship to market, is in direct violation of the *Landscape SA Act 2019*. The act of doing so can incur a maximum penalty of $125,000 or two years imprisonment via prosecution. Landholders not complying with directions from an Authorised Officer may also be subject to an expiation fee.

The SA Arid Lands Landscape Board regularly runs programs to support land managers in removing the unfit to load goats. Contact the board's office for more information on these.

Those that are fit to load once captured cannot stay on a property for any longer than six weeks, regardless of market price.



The sale of feral goats

Recent rules have been made that will require all sheep and goats to be fitted with eID tags when moving from your property.

An exemption to tagging can apply to Harvested Rangeland Goats (HRG).

These are goats that;

- have been captured from a wild state AND
- have not been born as a result of a managed breeding program AND
- have not been subjected to any animal husbandry procedure or treatment

To meet this exemption and to avoid the requirement to tag goats, Harvested Rangeland Goats can be moved from property of capture to a registered goat depot or abattoir without an NLIS device if the following conditions are met.

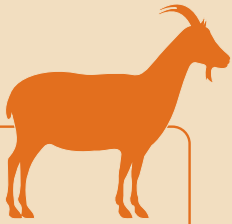
1. **Goats that meet the definition of HRG**
2. **Current PIC registered to your property**
   Registering and updating a PIC
   www.integritysystems.com.au/about/contacts
3. **LPA accreditation for goats**
   LPA accreditation page – goats
   www.integritysystems.com.au/on-farm-assurance/livestock-product-assurance
4. **LPA accreditation for HRG**
   LPA accreditation page – HRG
   www.integritysystems.com.au/on-farm-assurance/livestock-product-assurance

If you are still using printed NVD waybill books, you will need to use the new version for HRG Goats.

To use eID tags, properties will need to be registered. This can be done at pir.sa.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/465989/harvested-rangeland-goats-hrg-accreditation.pdf

Why goats hurt your business more than you think

An average single dry feral goat consumes up to 900g of dry vegetation per day (MLA), which is considered equal to that of an average sized merino wether. That means 100 goats on your land are consuming an equivalent amount as 100 sheep, without providing wool or a consistent return. Larger bucks, pregnant and lactating females will have the grazing impact of 1.5-2 dry sheep equivalent, or DSE.



100 dry goats

OPTIONS FOR USE

- **destroy on the property**
- **send for slaughter**
- **re-locate to land where domestic goats are permitted**

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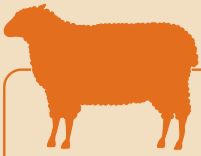


100 marino wethers

OPTIONS FOR USE

- **a constant return of wool**
- **a return of meat**
- **Value generated through lambs and trading genetics**

Dry sheep equivalent (DSE) for classes of goats

Class	DSE* based on limited information	Weight range
1 dry doe	0.75 DSE	30-40kg
1 breeding doe	1.2 DSE during pregnancy. During lactation, 1.5 DSE for single kids, 1.9 DSE for twins.	40-60kg
1 weaner	0.7 DSE from weaning to one year old	20-40kg
1 buck	1.5 DSE to 2 DSE	60-80kg

Goats are opportunistic feeders. They target the species favoured by livestock, grazing them to ground level and leaving very little behind for stock, before moving onto other species that are not favoured by sheep. Over time, this leads to a decline in pasture quality and ultimately reduces the carrying capacity of land.

In marginal years, goats will outcompete sheep. They are hardy, mobile, and less dependent on water points. They will strip the landscape bare while sheep struggle to survive.

Each doe has an annual birthing cycle and produces 1-2 kids each time. In exceptional seasons, a doe has been known to double the number of birthing cycles.

Without control, goat populations will continue to increase with the potential to double every 1.6 years. With does sexually maturing at six months of age, the release or non-removal of undersize does or female kids will likely result in numbers outpacing the removal efforts through mustering alone.

Controlling 100 goats on a property will save 900kg of vegetation on the ground each day. Over a year, that figure increases to 328,500kg, or 328.5 tonnes. The increased vegetation will result in improved soil quality and greater drought resilience. This will provide improved livestock productivity in the long term.

To prevent populations from increasing, more than 35 per cent of the population must be removed annually. It is particularly important that undersized goats are removed from the landscape at the same time, or in between mustering and market processing takes place.

Allowing younger goats to escape, remain or return to the landscape is not only illegal, it results in a growing number of goats in the landscape for years to come, which ultimately affects the bottom line of livestock businesses.

Unmanaged goats: What are they costing you?

A report prepared for the SA Arid Lands Landscape Board in June 2023, by BDO EconSearch analysed four different property scenarios in the SA Rangelands with varying degrees of goat management.

The Analysis of Unmanaged Goats in the South Australian Rangelands showed that over an eight year average price to 2022, an average pastoral lease that sustains 20,000 head between merino sheep and goats will be far more profitable with zero tolerance to unmanaged goats.

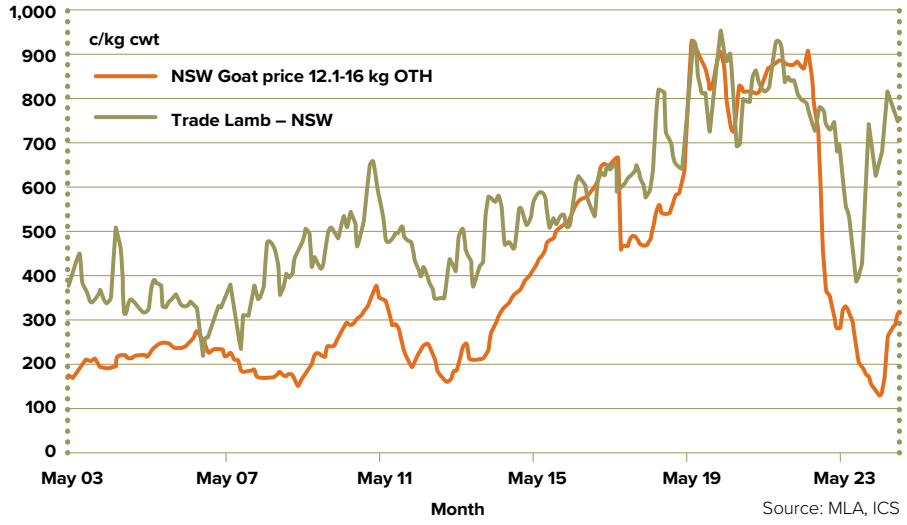
It showed that when sheep numbers were not reduced as the number of unmanaged goats increased, lamb marking was 20 per cent lower, and the wool cut was 30 per cent lower. Additionally, even with the income made from unmanaged goats, the gross margin per head was the least profitable of all scenarios compared.

A property that harvests unmanaged goats but adjusts the grazing pressure in line with goat numbers was less profitable than the property with zero tolerance, and more profitable than the property that did not adjust sheep numbers.

The fourth scenario was a farmed goat enterprise with unmanaged goats minimised. This scenario was the most profitable at the time, but does not take into account the cost of setting up this property to meet the requirements. This option is not available to landholders within the SA Arid Lands.

The report was written at a time when the five year average over-the-hook goat price was $5.92/kg. The most recent average over-the-hook price from October 2025 was 5.57/kg.

Goat and trade lamb prices



Source: MLA, ICS

Feral goats feeding in the outback.

Environmental damage you can't afford to ignore

Goats aren't just a problem for production, they are also a major threat to Australia's natural environment.

Feral goats heavily browse native shrubs, saplings, and groundcovers. In some ecosystems, they are the primary barrier to vegetation recovery, particularly after fire or drought. The large number of plant species palatable to them and their ability to browse and graze in inaccessible areas add to the threat.

In places like the Flinders, Gawler and Olary ranges, feral goats have stripped entire areas of regeneration, especially young Mulga, Acacias, and River Red Gums.

The ability of goats to survive on lower nutrient fibrous vegetation enables them to continue to feed under adverse environmental conditions. They will outcompete sheep during drought, attributed to their ability to browse on vegetation up to two metres high on trees and their willingness to eat fallen leaves.

Enclosure experiments have demonstrated the species' potential to overgraze and prevent regeneration of plants, which is more likely to be prevalent during drought.[1] The composition of plant communities may be altered as a result of intense browsing by feral goats.[2]

1. #Harrington 1979; Harrington 1986

2. www.environment.nsw.gov.au/topics/animals-and-plants/threatened-species/nsw-threatened-species-scientific-committee/determinations/final-determinations/2004-2007/competition-and-habitat-degradation-by-feral-goats-capra-hircus-key-threatening-process-listing


Slender bellfruit

Feral goats can cause a 100 per cent reduction in key native plant species such as Mulga (*Acacia aneura*) and Rosewood (*Alectryon oleifolius*). By eating the seedlings of palatable species, they effectively halt their regeneration and once woody regeneration is suppressed, erosion risk increases, biodiversity declines, and native animals lose critical habitat.[3]

Feral goats also contribute to the decline of locally threatened fauna species, including the Yellow-footed Rock-wallaby, Malleefowl, and various ground-nesting birds, by degrading habitat and competing for resources.

3. invasives.org.au/meet-the-invaders/goats.


Spidery wattle

Nationally, feral goats are recognised as a threat to 44 endangered native plant species listed under the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. They include Slender bellfruit (*Codonocarpus pyramidalis*), Purplewood Wattle (*Acacia carneorum*), Menzel's wattle (*acacia menzelii*), Spidery wattle (*Acacia araneosa*), Ooldea guinea flower (*Hibbertia crispula*) and the Desert Greenhood (*Pterostylis xerophila*) in the SA Arid Lands region.


Desert Greenhood


Ooldea guinea flower

Photo: by Barb Murphy

Erosion and water damage: The land degrades faster than you think

Bare ground is a recipe for disaster in arid and semi-arid landscapes.

By removing vegetation cover, goats expose soils to wind and water erosion. Gullies, sheet erosion, and dust storms are common symptoms of areas impacted by feral goats.

Add a significant rain event when there's no groundcover holding the land together and the damage can be much greater.

A CSIRO study in the rangelands found that erosion rates doubled in areas with uncontrolled feral goat populations compared to adjacent managed areas.[4]

The study also showed that in the years following goat removal, the reduction in erosion is rapid, followed by a continued slower impact decline over the next two years, coincident with a relative increase in ground-cover vegetation.

It was thought that both direct physical disturbance by the goats and secondary effects due to goat impacts on the substrate and ground-cover vegetation contributed to the increase in erosion associated with the presence of goats.

Water points are particularly vulnerable. Goats degrade riparian vegetation, pollute surface water with faeces, and compact the soil around springs and soakages, reducing infiltration and increasing evaporation. Once a water point is degraded, it can take decades to recover, if it recovers at all.

4. Feral goats (Capra hircus L.) in the Macleay River gorge system, north-eastern New South Wales, Australia. I. Impacts on soil erosion | Wildlife Research | ConnectSci

The law around goats

Landholders of private or public land have a responsibility to control feral goats. An acceptable level of control is determined by landscape boards.

In South Australia (SA), a captured feral goat is one that has been collected from the free-run of a property and is held for sale in a yard on a property or a nearby location.

Regardless of where you live in SA, a captured feral goat cannot be held in captivity for longer than six weeks under Section 192(3)(a) of the *Landscape South Australia Act* 2019.

The six weeks gives landholders an opportunity to capture more and make transporting them to an abattoir or depot most cost-efficient.

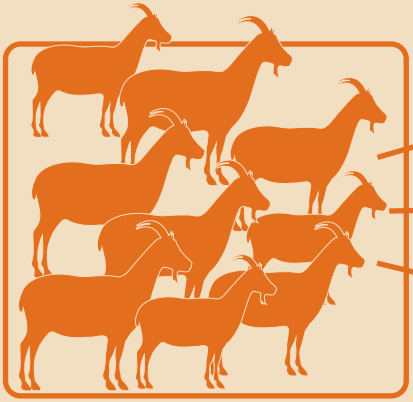
All captured feral goats must be either destroyed on the property, sent for slaughter, or re-domesticated on land where domestic goats are permitted.

At the conclusion of the six weeks, they must either be removed or destroyed. It is illegal to re-release goats of any size, regardless if they are too small or unfit to transport.

People who have feral goats in their possession or control for longer than the six week period could face a $600 expiation or a fine of $12,500 via prosecution.

Domestic goats are not allowed to be kept in the Flinders Ranges Planning Area without a permit. Bringing a feral goat into the area is prohibited and also carries a maximum penalty of $12,500.

FERAL GOATS MAY BE HELD ON THE PROPERTY WHERE THEY WERE CAPTURED, FOR A MAXIMUM OF SIX WEEKS.



OPTIONS FOR CAPTURED FERAL GOATS:

- **destroy on the property**
- **send for slaughter**
- **relocate to land where domestic goats are permitted.**

Feral goats and Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Feral goats have a significant carbon footprint and unlike livestock, their emissions are not offset by productive value.

Like cattle and sheep, feral goats produce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions primarily through enteric fermentation (methane) and manure (methane and nitrous oxide).

As ruminants, goats break down plants using microbes in their rumen. One group, methanogens, produces methane as a by-product, which the animal releases mostly by belching. Their manure adds further methane as it decomposes in oxygen-free conditions, and nitrous oxide as nitrogen from urine and dung is processed in the soil.[5]

Feral goats also drive emissions indirectly by degrading vegetation and reducing the capacity of rangeland ecosystems to capture and store carbon.

Goat browsing strips shrubs and trees, prevents seedling regeneration, bares off country and accelerates erosion. These impacts shrink standing biomass and soil organic carbon which reduces sequestration capacity. In semi-arid rangelands, even moderate goat densities can suppress regrowth for decades.

Reducing feral goat numbers therefore offers a dual benefit: cutting ongoing emissions and allowing degraded landscapes to resume sequestering carbon.

This would be a meaningful contribution to Australia's broader climate and land management goals.[6]

Emissions from rangeland goats are not easily quantified, but a three-year Goat Sustainability Project, funded by the MLA Donor Company in partnership with the University of Queensland, aims to measure these emissions and sequestration potential. By assessing the carbon balance at demonstration sites and the factors influencing emissions, it intends to pave the way for a more sustainable and economically viable goat industry. It is due to be completed in late 2026.[7]

5. www.dcceew.gov.au/climate-change/emissions-reduction/agricultural-land-sectors/livestock

6. pestsmart.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/06/HerbivoreGreenhouse_BengsenCox.pdf

7. www.mla.com.au/news-and-events/industry-news/industry-game-changer-goat-sustainability-project-underway

The history of goats

A recent survey estimated at least 2.6 million feral goats are currently living in Australia. Because numbers fluctuate enormously with drought, management programs and fertility levels, so it is difficult to accurately assess numbers.

Feral goats are now found in all Australian states and territories, as well as some offshore islands. They are most common in the rocky or hilly semi-arid areas of South Australia, western New South Wales, Western Australia and Queensland, occupying an estimated two million square kilometres of the country.

Goats arrived in Australia with the First Fleet in 1788. As they were small and hardy, ate a range of plants and provided meat and milk, dairy goats were a convenient livestock for the early European settlers and later railway construction crews and miners.

Angora and Cashmere goats were brought from Asia in the mid-1800s to start a fibre industry and African Boer goats were imported by farmers as recently as the 1980s for meat production.

Their ability to jump and climb made domestic goats great escape artists. Feral goats established in Australia when they escaped, were abandoned, or were deliberately released. During the 19th century, sailors released goats onto islands and some areas of the mainland for an emergency food supply. More recently, goats were used to keep plantation forests and inland pastoral land free of weeds.

Goats arrive in Australia, 19th century. Image: AI-Generated

Goats from the northern and central Flinders Ranges

Taking action – for profit and for the land

It's clear that unmanaged feral goats do more harm than good. While occasional mustering can provide income, it's not a sustainable strategy. The long-term costs of pasture loss, erosion, reduced carrying capacity, and ecosystem damage far outweigh the short-term gains.

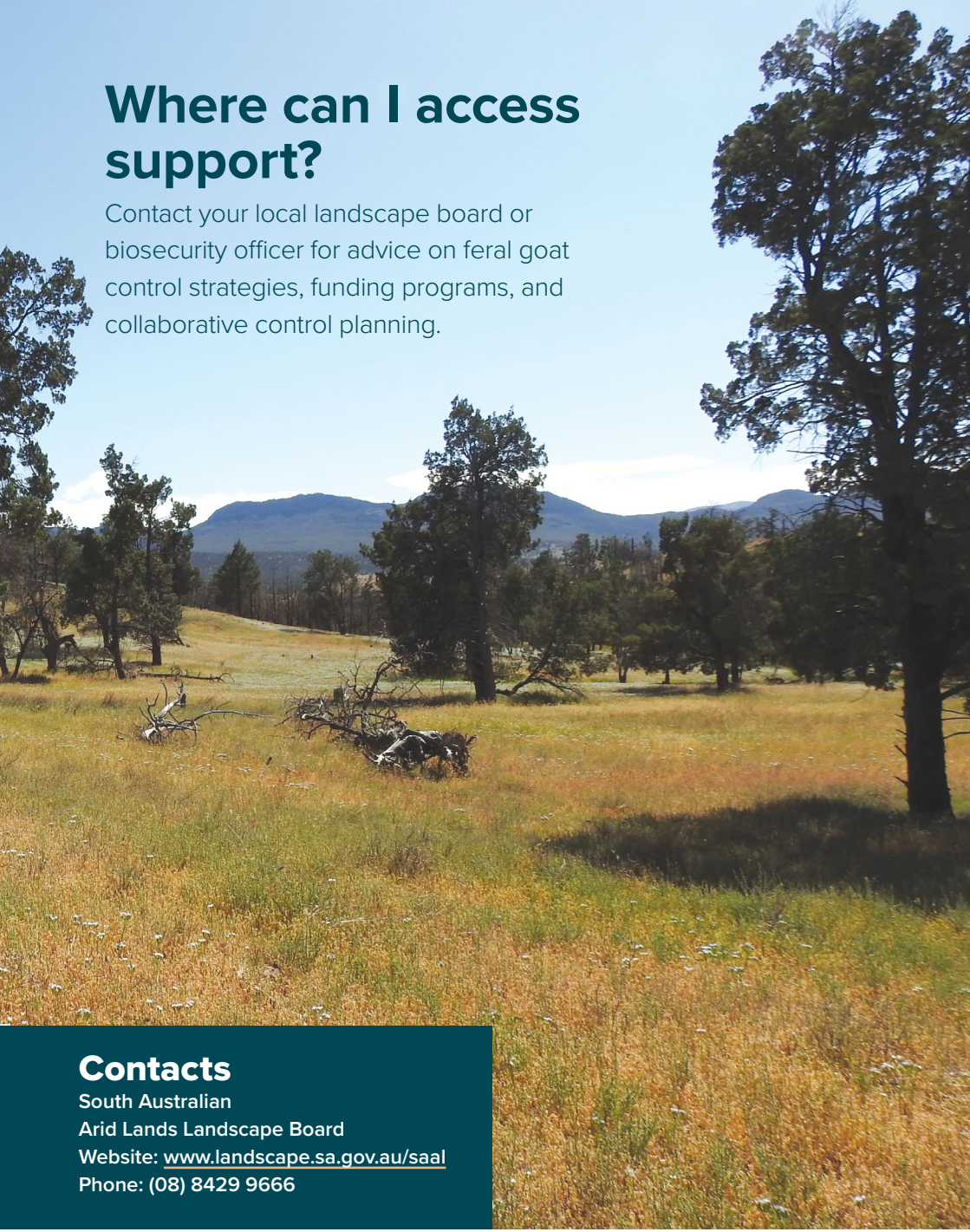
Here's what you can do:

- **Invest in a multi-faceted control approach.** Incorporate strategic culling, trapping, and water point exclusion fencing in your management plan.
- **Work with neighbours** to coordinate control. Goats don't respect boundaries, and collaborative control is more effective.
- **Access funding and support** from your local landscape board, state government, or Indigenous ranger programs. Many regions offer technical, logistical, and sometimes financial support.
- **Monitor land condition and biomass**, and make goats part of your total grazing pressure calculations … not a bonus.

Your land is your legacy. Don't let feral goats rob you of its future.

Where can I access support?

Contact your local landscape board or biosecurity officer for advice on feral goat control strategies, funding programs, and collaborative control planning.



Contacts

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Australian Government | Future Drought Fund | SA DROUGHT HUB | LANDSCAPE SOUTH AUSTRALIA SA ARID LANDS