

## **Weeds officers training and education program: an innovative and successful approach**

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### DEVELOPING THE PACKAGE

Development of the Weeds Officers Training and Education Program (Package) has taken a relatively short period of time in comparison to development time I have experienced in over 20 years involvement in education and training.

In August 1997 – NWAC (National Weeds Advisory Committee) invited submissions for funding for projects under the Regional Weeds Action Plan.

At a meeting in Orange, the Macquarie Valley Weeds Advisory Committee (MVWAC) decided to put in a submission. A subcommittee was formed and a submission put together in late 1997. The submission was forwarded for signing off in November 1998. The Committee then advertised for a Project Officer to assist with the development of the Program. I was successful in being appointed and an Agreement was signed in late 1998.

The basis of our submission was to have a quality training management system that would be nationally recognised with clearly defined career pathways.

An important factor in the success of the project was, that in addition to grant funds provided through NWAC, participating councils contributed in finance or in kind a matching proportion of funds – this gave ownership of the process.

The application was granted \$120 000 and local control authorities contributed a further \$50 000.

A training subcommittee was formed consisting of Roger Smith, Bryson Rees, Peter Giles, Ian Chapman, George Hammond and myself. The enthusiasm of this group undoubtedly was a key component of the project's success.

The Committee worked closely with the National Competency Project, to ensure the two projects were compatible. Two of our steering committee members were invited to take part on the National Competency

Project Committee so that MVWAC had direct input and knowledge of the ultimate goals being sought by the Competency Project. This assured the MVWAC project was integrated.

The MVWAC Education Training Committee worked extensively towards meeting the requirements of the national competency standards, and local government training requirements.

An extension of the activities of our Committee was to achieve support and backing from ALL key players in the workplace, including the Local Government and Shire Association (LGSA), NSW Government, NSW Agriculture, State Forests, Road Traffic Authority, Rail Services of Australia, National Parks and Wildlife, Municipal Employees Union (MEU).

Department of Land and Water Conservation, Landcare, Rural Land Protection Boards (RLPBs) etc. Education providers such as TAFE, NSW Agriculture, Primary Industry Training and Advisory Board (PITAB), Rural Training Council of Australia, and the Cooperative Research Centre for Weed Management Systems were all consulted to ensure relativity, and to avoid duplication.

The project was the first time all relevant stakeholders had been involved and fully committed to achieving a measurable outcome a course acceptable to the industry and one that would be taken up by weed officers.

Numerous attempts had been made over nearly two decades to develop training programs for the industry. Extensive amounts of state government funds, effort, and time have been expended but there had never been any cohesion, and few measurable outcomes.

Rapid progress towards the development of the project began with the listing of all the minimum requirements weed officers needed to comply with competency standards within their workplace. A skills analysis was done of officers within the Macquarie Valley Weeds Advisory area.

A review was done of the national competency work in conjunction with a meeting of Macquarie Valley weeds officers, NSW Agriculture, MEU, LGSA, Tocal College, TAFE and Charles Sturt University. This peak meeting of relevant stakeholders gave endorsement to the direction and establishment of the national competency standards. It must be emphasised that this was the first time that the ultimate stakeholders, i.e. weeds officers, actually had empowerment of the process.

This peak meeting also gave endorsement to the development of the Weeds Officers Training and Education program. Weeds officers were always involved following this forum and have been the major players in the development of the project.

A state advisory committee on education and training was established comprising all stakeholders to supervise the overall development of the Training and Education Program. This committee was chaired by Mr. Richard Carter, then Program Leader Weeds, NSW Agriculture.

#### A DREAM BECOMES A REALITY

A skills analysis done of weeds officers in the Macquarie and Lachlan regions, and a search of all existing training courses and resource materials resulted in an agreement to use, in a modified form, Certificate 2, Weed Control Operations and Certificate 4, Weed Control Practice as core units to benchmark the training program.

In conjunction with skills analysis and Certificates 2 and 4, a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) process was developed to be piloted within the Macquarie Valley. Five officers undertook an RPL exercise in conjunction with Tocal Agriculture College (NSW Agriculture) who were contracted to co-develop a manual, skills book, video, and an information package.

In the meantime all officers were benchmarked with their chemical accreditation and various other training modules were undertaken to fulfil agreed upon skills deficiencies i.e. Legal training and weed seedling identification training (a CRC course).

Approximately 80 weeds officers have completed Certificate 2 in weed control operations and 34 have completed Certificate 4 in weed control practice. The first Certificates 2 and 4 were presented in 1999 at the Tocal College Certificate Day by the Director General of NSW Agriculture Dr. Kevin Sheridan.

In November 1999, 15 officers successfully completed a Rural Workplace Trainer and Assessor Course in Mudgee. It was the largest group to undertake the Workplace Trainer and Assessor Program for the Primary Industry Training Board. The value of the assistance from the PITAB is conservatively placed at \$15,000.

We attended and did a presentation to the 10th Biannual Noxious Weeds Conference held in Ballina in July 1999 to make sure everybody in the industry were kept informed. I addressed NWAC, elected members (Councillors) and weeds officers and Mr. Richard Carter gave a presentation to the conference on National Competency Standards and the Training Program.

The Project team participated actively in Weeds Buster Week in 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001 and will again this year – excellent media exposure.

MVWAC and the Education and Training Committee initiated a noxious weed awareness-training program through an extensive TV advertising campaign.

This has lifted noxious weed awareness to a high level throughout our region.

In an effort to raise the awareness of noxious weeds problems and identification, study tours for weeds officers and elected members were developed and introduced for the Macquarie and Lachlan Valley regions in 1997. They are now held biannually and are available to weeds officers throughout the whole state.

Presentations were given to other Advisory Committees and several officers from those regions commenced RPL assessment and have successfully completed training.

The manual for the RPL has been printed and is in wide circulation. The skills competency logbook developed in conjunction with the national competency work and the training video are also in circulation.

The Education Steering Committee was successful in having a second grant for the extension of the training and education program nationally, and for the development of identified modules to address specific training needs e.g. Spray Drift Minimisation and Risk Management.

This project has addressed one of the key points and prime objects of the National and State weeds strategies – education and training.

MVWAC has worked very hard to achieve common goals required by weeds officers in NSW and is grateful for the extensive support extended from all the training providers and other key stakeholders.

The Conservation and Land Management Training Package includes weeds management and other specialist areas. The training package containing the national competency standards will set the benchmarks for individual performance and guide the design and development of future training programs, thus allowing Weeds officers (and others in the industry) to have training programs with Nationally recognised awards from Certificate to Advanced Diploma level under the National Training Framework.

Instead of waiting back in 1997 when the development of National competencies had started and Training packages were being ‘mooted’ the Macquarie Valley Weeds Advisory Committee were pro-active and proudly can stand here today with a project that has been owned and driven by the intended participants – the weeds officers. This ‘bottom up’ approach has worked and it is without fear of contradiction that I can say that it has been one of the most cost effective and efficient training programs developed for industry.

The outcomes can be measured in the numbers completed or undertaking the program (Table 1).

It involves all aspects of the National Training Agenda and genuinely uses Recognition of Prior Learning.

**Table 1.** Weeds Officer Participation in Training Project (1998–2002).

	1998	1999	2000	2001	Total approx.
Chemical Use Accreditation i.e., Chemical AQF III	10	40	70	70	200
Other short courses i.e., AQF II and III	8	26	140	44	300
Certificate II, AQF 3	0	5	28	43	80
Certificate IV, AQF 4	0	2	14	18	32
Certificate V/VI, Associate Diploma – AQFs	0	0	0	8	8
Higher qualification (i.e., Degree)	0	0	0	0	0
Spray Drift Management, AQF 4/5, Risk Assessment and Planning	0	0	128	128	256
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>380</b>	<b>311</b>	

What is the ‘Package’?

- Skills audit of officers
- Recognition of their skills (or current competencies)
- Mapping of those skills (competencies) against existing (and in the future, training packages)
- A skills record book
- A promotional video
- A career training pathway.

#### AN INNOVATIVE AND SUCCESSFUL APPROACH

This case study demonstrates the value of a industry led education and training program that includes industry skills assessment, recognition of prior learning, targeted accredited training and quality delivery resources.

The success of this program, which has seen over eighty (80) weeds officers undertake skills assessment and over five hundred (500) participants in training events since 2000, has been due to active participation and support of all stakeholders.

#### CONCLUSION

Currently we are piloting a Level V (Diploma level course) which will extend the package from short courses to management level.

May we take this opportunity of thanking you – the industry and all involved for allowing me to be part of the most innovative and effective education and training programs we have witnessed in over 25 years involvement in education and training.