

A Weeds Officer's perspective on training

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Summary The following paper outlines advancements in the training and certification of Weeds Officers throughout New South Wales, including the process undertaken to achieve this.

Keywords Competency based training, recognition, benefits, stakeholders.

INTRODUCTION

As a Weeds Officer and President of NSW Weeds Officers Association Inc., it is hard to believe that starting in a position of a Weeds Officer in 1978, that one would have to wait until the year 2000 to have a co-ordinated, recognised and competency based training program in NSW.

While it must be said that Local Government Councils did offer some training for Weeds Officers it was not always of full benefit to those attending. Nor was it recognised outside your Council, so gaining promotion other than through the salary system was most difficult.

The road to achieving a state wide recognised system has been a long one, and one involving a tremendous amount of input and man-hours to achieve a result. The following will briefly outline the process involved.

METHOD

In August 1997 at a Macquarie Valley Weeds Advisory Committee Meeting it was decided to apply for funding from NSW Agriculture to develop an education and training program for Weeds Officers. Over time the MVWAC received three separate grants to fulfil three stages:

- Certificate II in Weed Control Operations
- Certificate IV in Weed Control Practice
- Diploma in Land Management – Weeds.

This meant the possible chance not only to have training organised and coordinated, but also the opportunity to lift the profile of the Weeds Officer.

The first hurdle encountered was that we did not want to go back to do training that we attended years ago. Fair call !

We knew that Weeds Officers had skills and if these were to be recognised, there was a better chance of having the support of the experienced Weeds Officer. A skills audit showed that there were shortfalls

in some areas of training appeared. As expected, these areas were critical for an officer to carry out their day to day tasks.

Report writing, conflict resolution and legal training, the shortfalls that industry needed to address were the creation of the education and training package. How do we start this process?

Industry and Association backing, Union and Local Government Involvement (Pilot Group to lead the way) with MVWAC employees:

- a Project Officer/Consultant, Mr. Reg Kidd, the partnership with an education institute
- CB Alexander College – Tocal
- the Pilot Group announced.

The Group was comprised of Weeds Officers from a cross-section of Councils. Some Councils supported training, some did not support training and different sizes of Councils were also represented. The Group consisted of:

- Roger Smith, Orange City Council
- Ian Chapman, Mid-Western County Council
- Peter Giles, Bogan Shire Council
- Don MacKenzie, Brewarrina Shire Council
- Bryson Rees, Wellington Council.

The first meeting of the Pilot Group was daunting for all five as Joanna Blunden, representing Tocal College, Reg Kidd the MVWAC Project Officer and Peter Gray from the NSW Agriculture also were uneasy of what lay ahead. What skills do Weeds Officers have and will they be able to use Recognition of Prior Learning (now and future will be recognition of current competence)?

Having now laid to rest all fears it was clear that the education and training package was now a reality. Next step was to have Weeds Officers across NSW accept and support the training package. This must happen for success to be gained.

With the Pilot Group slowly moving towards D-Day (Graduation), there was starting to appear a legion of Weeds Officers willing to join in the process.

In April 2000, five Weeds Officers from the Pilot Group became the first graduates of the program. All five Officers received Certificate II in Weed Control Operations and two Officers also receiving Certificate IV in Weed Control Practice.

The standard had been set. It was now up to these Officers to go out and about NSW to sell the process and share their experiences with fellow Weeds Officers.

As support started to increase, the working group moved from workshop to workshop around NSW. It was only now we believed that the end result was achievable.

The workshop raised another problem in that some Councils still believed that Weeds Officers only sprayed weeds; they don't need training. While this number today is a decreasing group, it still remains that a few Councils and Senior Staff do not see training as a priority or need. It must be said that the Weeds Officers caught up in this group are falling further and further behind their colleagues.

Weeds Officers training during this time saw other changes that would effect the training package. The new Pesticide Act, 1999:

- Occupational Health and Safety Act, 2000,
- the National Competencies for Land Management – Weeds (hopefully signed off now),
- the Employment of a full time training co-ordinator at Tocal College by NSW Agriculture.

While this went on, short course development took an important role in the education and training package. A couple of these courses included Minimisation of Off-Target Damage and a three stage Legal Training course. The short course development program has and will continue for some time yet.

As the workshops continued around the State it became obvious that other stakeholders would be able to use the training package. Some of these include:

- Rural Land Protection Boards
- National Parks and Wildlife
- State Forests
- Rail Infrastructure Corporation
- Department of Land and Water Conservation.

Following the success of Certificate II and IV we now have mentors within our own Weeds Officers' ranks across the State of NSW. To fully complete the package

another eight Weeds Officers are currently doing the Diploma Level and once completed will give the industry a career path for those currently in the industry and those joining to follow.

RESULTS

The benefits have been:

- The chance to upgrade their skill level
- Current skills recognised
- For some, first chance to receive accredited training
- Skills are now being transferred into job descriptions
- Qualification recognised across the state by Local Government
- Training receiving support of Local Government
- Some cases training has meant wage increases
- Acceptances of the need for training by Weeds Officers
- A more professional Weeds Officer
- Weeds Officers now becoming mentors in their own ranks
- A partnership with Tocal Agricultural College and a one stop database on training.

While it may not always be said, the Weeds Officers and their Association fully appreciate the support, funding and drive put into lifting their profile through training.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I would also like to thank the MVWAC Chairman, Mr. George Hammond, for his input to this paper and his drive and guidance.

Finally to the Weeds Officers across New South Wales that have embraced the education and training package, a package developed for Weeds Officers by Weeds Officers.