Engaging organisations for improved weed management

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Summary  Victoria’s Tackling Weeds on Private Land (TWoPL) initiative seeks to influence a range of key stakeholders to take responsibility for weed management. This paper presents a working example of how engagement at a state-wide level builds partnerships and organisational capacity, promotes innovation and establishes a strategic approach in key stakeholders with the focus on improved weed management.

Victoria’s Department of Primary Industries delivers the key components of the three year TWoPL initiative on behalf of the Department of Sustainability and Environment. The initiative will assist in the implementation of the Government’s Victorian Pest Management Framework, which sets direction for pest management within Victoria.

This paper also explores the issues of influencing change in environmental management within organisations and industry through a planned approach to engagement. The TWoPL initiative provides an example of how project design, stakeholder analysis, attitudinal research and consultation can inform the development of an engagement program. In a changing climate, engagement plans focused on weed management must be designed with the flexibility and rigour to enable achievement of effective, measurable results that can be demonstrated to government and community.

Keywords  Influence, partnerships, responsibility, capacity, engagement.

INTRODUCTION
The Victorian government recognises that a widely held perception within the community is that weeds are government’s problem. In order to overcome this significant barrier for implementation of the Victorian Pest Management Framework (VPMF) the Tackling Weeds on Private Land (TWoPL) initiative was launched in 2004. The initiative carries the slogan ‘Weeds are everyone’s property’.

The initiative is based on the premise that more can be done to co-ordinate various groups of land managers and industries whose actions and activities have a significant influence on how weeds impact on private land. This will support private land weed management investment and assist in building the will and capacity of all land managers to tackle weeds over the longer term.

The TWoPL project components are delivered through four subprojects: Partnerships; Prevention and Early Intervention; Enhanced enforcement; and Engagement. This paper discusses how in a changing social, environmental and economic climate the Partnerships Subproject has developed and is delivering engagement activities to influence key stakeholders accepting and acting on their weed management responsibilities in a collaborative manner.

METHODS
The Victorian Department of Primary Industries (DPI) Project Management Framework has been used as the underpinning planning method for the TWoPL project. Adoption of new or different practices is a staged process. The model used by this initiative is a progression along a continuum of ‘awareness and ‘acceptance’ to ‘action’ (the ‘triple A continuum’). Potential differences exist between an individual within a stakeholder organisation and the stakeholder organisation itself on the ‘aware’, ‘accept’ and ‘act’ continuum. The project’s evaluation plan will take these differences into account through survey design (Anderson 2005).

Identify project key stakeholders  Informed by the VPMF and stakeholder analysis, five key stakeholders were identified whose activities have significant influence on how weeds impact on private land: 1) Catchment Management Authorities who have a pivotal role in community representation for strategic natural resource management; 2) Local Government who, apart from being a land manager, are a community educator, priority setter, program coordinator and advocate for environmental management; 3) Linear Reserve Managers whose transit corridors provide a pathway for weed spread potentially impacting on thousands of landholders; 4) The Victorian garden industry because 66% of introduced plant species to Australia are garden escapees (Groves et al. 2005), and; 5) The Victorian fodder industry, the main fodder producing state in Australia and some of this industry’s activities are recognised by DPI as a pathway for the spread of weeds (Blood 2005).

Stakeholder analysis  Conducted at the beginning of the project, stakeholder analysis informed the scope
and development of the Partnerships engagement plan. The stakeholder analysis included the compilation of information to determine organisation/industry structure, operational systems and networks, decision-making processes and key personnel, inter and intra-organisational dependencies, size of organisation/industry, and major organisations/industry influences (Mantelli 2005).

Understanding stakeholder attitudes Research methodology was designed to collect quantitative data to enable positioning of stakeholders along the ‘Triple A’ continuum so that any changes over the life of the project could be measured objectively. Qualitative data was collected and analysed to provide information on attitudes, practices, motivators and barriers to change relating to weed management. Key findings along with stakeholder analysis have been used to identify and target engagement strategies for each key stakeholder (King 2005a,b,c). The quantitative research used phone surveys with a series of closed questions and the qualitative research involved in-depth interviews with industry members and agency staff (King 2005a,b,c).

Measuring performance A performance indicator and associated targets have been established to track the impact of the Partnerships engagement activities over the life of the project. Percentage awareness, acceptance and action by stakeholders at the start, mid term and end of project are the performance indicators used.

Developing an engagement plan The three staged engagement model developed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has been used. The stages are: 1) information delivery; 2) consultation; and 3) active participation. Underpinning the employment of these engagement activities are key principles for encouraging active stakeholder participation as a partner with the TWoPL initiative Partnerships Sub-project. These include trust, mutual respect, clarity of roles and responsibilities, agreement to listen, sharing risks, accessible and transparent decision making structures, empowerment, training, development and education for partners.

Baseline organisational and industry stakeholder attitude surveys conducted by the project have provided information on barriers to, as well as drivers and pathways for, adoption. These learnings have informed the development of the Engagement Plan.

This plan will be periodically reviewed and amended given that initial and ongoing dialogue with organisational and industry personnel may identify opportunities for improving TWoPL engagement.

RESULTS

The engagement plan The following are some examples of insights and findings from key stakeholder analysis and attitudinal research:

- Key TWoPL stakeholder organisations can be categorised into two groups: institutions (e.g. Municipal Councils) and commercial enterprises (e.g. Landscape Industry Association of Victoria).
- There was a discrepancy in understanding and commitment between executive and operational levels of the organisations/ institutions.
- Community pressure is a major motivator for activity in institutions.
- There was a continuing history of confusion over issues of jurisdiction of responsibilities.
- The garden industry is very large and complex containing ten definable segments. Five priority segments were identified as key influencers for the project: 1) The Nursery Garden Industry of Victoria (including weekend markets); 2) wholesalers; 3) Landscape Industry Association of Victoria; 4) the Horticultural Media Association; and 5) large retailers.
- The absence of centralised and consistent information about weed management responsibilities, such as weed lists, led to extreme levels of variation of understanding within the industry.
- Innovative approaches to industry that focus on their commercial imperatives are required to leverage change for improved strategic weed management.
- While industry respondents believe it is important to educate customers, this belief is not equally reflected in practice.
- The existence of collaborative activities for weed management in the fodder and garden industries is limited.
- While respondents considered weed spread an important issue, acceptance and implementation of weed spread prevention practices is comparatively low.
- Limited information and knowledge was inhibiting adoption of good weed management practices (King 2005a,b,c, Mantelli 2005).

The following is a summary of the engagement activities undertaken at each stage of the ‘triple A’ continuum:

Aware

- Informed by the stakeholder analysis, fact sheets are developed incorporating specific messages and technical information.
Fact sheets and introductory letters are sent to institution/industry association executive and staff/members.

Presentations at institution/industry run forums/conferences/regional meetings provide information.

Accept
- High level meetings are held to gain executive support for the TWoPL initiative.
- An incentive grant program is implemented to build strategic weed management, partnerships, capacity and promote innovation.
- Feedback is provided to key stakeholders on the performance of their weed management programs.

Act
- Grant project development and implementation are supported.
- Key stakeholder participation is sought in planning and running institution/industry forum/information sessions. The forums are designed to showcase good work, share information, and enhance networking and partnership development within institutions/industry. They also allow institution/industry members to tell their weed management stories.
- Recognition is given to key stakeholders at forums, in the media and opportunistically.
- Opportunities are taken for stakeholders to participate in the shaping of policy.

Of the 62 identified Municipal Councils for further progression along the ‘triple A’ continuum, 36 have demonstrated progression to active weed management. Approximately 250 staff from nearly 100 organisations have attended three regional Victorian weed management forums. Evaluation of regional forums identified that the key take home messages were ‘weeds are everyone’s property’ and ‘partnerships, sharing and collaboration are important’ (King 2005a,b,c, King 2006). Four of the five Linear Reserve Managers are implementing new strategic weed management projects and advocating the benefits to others.

Although engagement to date has focused primarily on Local Government and Linear Reserve Managers, early indicators of engagement impact with industry stakeholders include: four of the five identified key industry associations having developed strategic weed management projects to incorporate into their business operations. Three industry association awareness events have been held and two are scheduled.

DISCUSSION
Initial stakeholder research has enabled identification of issues that will affect key stakeholders’ ability to act on their weed management responsibilities and roles. Following are examples of how delivery of the project engagement plan has considered ongoing social, environmental economic change.

The impact of competitive global and local markets has seen a willingness by some industry sectors to seek a competitive advantage through marketing of quality products. TWoPL is working with both the fodder and garden industry leaders to take advantage of this climate by using market forces to drive change.

Extended dry periods in Victoria over the last ten years have led to some promotion and use of garden species that have lower moisture requirements for survival. Some of these species may pose a high risk threat to economic and environmental assets. TWoPL is working with the garden industry, including the landscaping segment, to minimise this risk.

Rural decline, including decreasing rural populations in some areas of the state (Barr 2005), has inhibited the capacity of many rural Municipal Councils to develop and resource strategic weed management programs. TWoPL is working with these Municipal Councils and providing support through incentives, facilitating collaboration and partnerships and providing technical advice on efficient incorporation of weed management into business operations.

Higher than average 2005–06 seasonal wildfire frequency and intensity has required an immediate response to highlight the increased risk to the community and fodder industry of weed spread during the recovery period.

Changing corporate structures, ownership and staff has required engagement activities to focus on influencing change to business systems and processes. Documenting engagement activities and results is critical for ensuring project continuity.

Future engagement activities for improved weed management in organisations could consider issues encountered and experiences from the TWoPL project, such as:
- A knowledge gap regarding weed spread mechanisms and risks via man made vectors and practical solutions for commercial businesses.
- Engage at several key levels/staff within an organisation to leverage change.
- To achieve lasting organisational change, work on changing business systems and processes, as staff turnover is generally high in the current workplace environment.
- Providing opportunity for key stakeholders to establish dialogue between each other and tell
their weed management stories can have a positive influence towards changing behaviour.

- Measure trends and opportunities for engagement with e-commerce industry and key influencers involved in the development and maintenance of population growth corridors. How do these trends affect the risk of weed incursion and spread? Where are the key engagement points to influence change?
- Place (geographic identity) is important when engaging and establishing partnerships.

CONCLUSION

Collaboration and partnerships between government, community and industry are essential to the success of weed management programs. The experience of the TWoPL project has shown it is possible to develop partnerships and collaborative activities with organisations, though a number of issues have been identified.

Poor previous engagement activities can be a barrier to forming partnerships, as can lack of engagement coordination. It is difficult to influence organisational change without first gaining support at the organisations executive level. In working with organisations TWoPL partnership staff acknowledge that partnerships rely on relationships between people, establishing dialogue and agreeing on mutual benefit. For successful partnerships each party must be willing to share power thereby relinquishing some control. This can sometimes be challenging for governance systems to adapt to.

A challenge for natural resource management agency staff in engaging organisations is to firstly take account of these issues in the design of engagement programs. Secondly, the engagement approach must be flexible enough to adapt to a changing organisational climate during the life of the project.

On completion, the TWoPL practice change project will seek to provide ‘take away’ systems and tools to agency extension staff and participating organisations. These will assist in facilitating enduring partnerships. This will allow ongoing community benefits by linking the results of the TWoPL practice change project to the planning and implementation of future weed management projects.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Currie Communications Pty Ltd for consultation and development of the ‘aware accept act’ continuum model for use in this project. Thank you to the many individuals who have assisted in developing and implementing this project’s Engagement Plan – Helen Anderson, Tony Lovick, Brendan Roughead, Brian Thompson, Beth Jones, Julie McGearry, Ian Dreher, Ugo Mantelli, Catriona King, Steve Young, Claire Norris, Donna Smithyman, Neil Smith, Mark Watt, Megan McCarthy, Daniel Joubert, Kate Blood and Penny Gillespie.

REFERENCES


