

Yarra Ranges Council: creating partnerships that really work

Gaye Gadsden

Yarra Ranges Council

(g.gadsden@yarraranges.vic.gov.au)

Summary Yarra Ranges Council is a peri-urban local government on the eastern edge of Melbourne. Seventy-six per cent of Yarra Ranges supports indigenous vegetation and weed invasion is considered to be one of the greatest threats to the area's rich biodiversity. Yarra Ranges Council commits over \$1 million to weed control annually.

Local government is in an excellent position to create effective partnerships that deal with challenging issues such as weed management. Employees are directly connected with other public land managers, environmental volunteer groups, recreational and township groups and individual residents. Local knowledge of biodiversity assets, key weed species and pathways of threat helps local government staff members to lead and co-ordinate strong partnership projects that achieve effective results.

Monitoring through weed mapping is showing improvements to Council managed bushland that is programmed for weed control.

Keywords Local government, weed management, public land management.

INTRODUCTION

Yarra Ranges Council is home to an extensive and unique flora and fauna that requires conservation and protection from major threats. In Australia, weed invasion is recognised as one of the largest environmental threats and this is the certainly the case in the high rainfall municipality of Yarra Ranges. In response Yarra Ranges Council developed a Weed Management Strategy in 2005. The implementation of this strategy has turned a primarily reactive management regime into an integrated weed control program that is planned on a landscape scale and monitored to measure success.

The key benefits of the Yarra Ranges Weed Management Program are:

- reduced weed threat to the highest value biodiversity assets in Yarra Ranges,
- new and emerging weeds targeted prior to establishment,
- protection of bushland conservation values on Council's bushland asset, and
- control of the spread of weeds from Council managed land.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Weed Management Program is implemented through:

- annual interagency meetings focussed on weed control to plan coordinated works across Yarra Ranges Council with other public land managers;
- implementing weed control in partnership with other public land managers through programs such as the Urban Fringe Weed Management Program and Corridors of Green;
- supporting 40 community groups who assist with weed control on 42 Council managed reserves;
- programmed weed control on 464 bushland reserves through 16 specialist bushland contractors;
- controlling noxious weeds on additional Council reserves and responding to 500 customer requests for weed control each year;
- new and emerging target weed program;
- micro planning through the development of annual plans for Council managed sites contractors and the 40 environmental groups who work on Council managed land;
- providing information and incentives to private land owners;
- monitoring the success of the program through weed mapping and key performance indicators.

RESULTS

Over 20 land managers from 6 public land management agencies attend the interagency meetings and together represent all geographic areas within Yarra Ranges. Yarra Ranges Council was the first to receive State Urban Fringe Weed Management Incentive (UFWMI) funding due to prior planning and relationship building at interagency meetings. Interagency meetings facilitated Melbourne Water undertaking weed control in the headwaters of waterways running through National Parks and VicRoads undertaking weed control along arterial roadsides through National Parks. Council matched the \$1M State UFWMI funding over the 4 year life of the project. Yarra Ranges Council carries out weed control on 80 roadsides that border National or State Parks. In partnership with Melbourne Water, weeds are controlled on 30 Council managed sites that have waterways. Yarra Ranges Council works in partnership with a community group

and/or land manager on over 50% of its 135 managed reserves.

Individual residents are provided with information, support and incentives to undertake weed control on privately managed land. The Urban Fringe Weed Management Initiative has provided specialist advice at 7 community events in the Dandenong Ranges this year. Weed control information kits were sent to 261 properties located around the National Park and reserves of the Dandenong Ranges. Council staff assisted groups/networks to secure state funding for 2 Landcare Facilitator positions within Yarra Ranges in 2012. Groups are provided with vouchers up to \$200 in value for hardware and IGA stores. Residents are provided with free tipping passes and plant vouchers as incentives to replace weeds with indigenous vegetation. One hundred and thirty Weed Wipeout vouchers have been issued to assist private landholders with tipping cost for weed disposal this year. Further free weed disposal is provided by community groups and Council through Weed Blitz and Weed Trade Days.

A comparison of weed mapping data sets from 2005 and 2011, revealed a 12% increase in high conservation value of Council's bushland reserves that are programmed for weed control. Analysis of 2011/12 weed mapping data reveals a further 2% increase this financial year.

DISCUSSION

Case study: Upper Monbulk Creek Land Management Unit – Urban Fringe Weed Management Initiative Through interagency meetings, gaps in weed control plans across Yarra Ranges were identified, largely on DSE and Parks Victoria managed land. As a result, when the Urban Fringe Weed Management Initiative was announced in 2010, Yarra Ranges was in a strong position. Yarra Ranges Council was the first to receive funding and is implementing weed control over the largest area of any of the UFWMI projects.

This Land Management Unit is one of 3 funded through the Urban Fringe Weed Management Initiative. Priorities for funding weed control in this case study illustrates the influence Yarra Ranges Council has on making integrated weed management happen on a landscape scale with multiple stakeholders through:

- protecting highest biodiversity assets – Dandenong Ranges National Park and Monbulk Creek upper catchment,
- facilitating relationships to get land managers and community groups working together towards the same aim, working with 15 groups and 6 public land agency staff in this LMU. In 17 of the 18 Council managed reserves in the Upper Monbulk Creek LMU, Council had formed pre UFWMI

partnerships with groups and land management agencies,

- engaging community through mailouts, providing advice by phone, supporting community activities such as the Annual Awesome Ornithorhynkids Day at Belgrave Lake Park and corporate and school revegetation days,
- resourcing weed control programs to maximise outcomes with Council committing \$130 000 to 18 reserves and 18 roadsides in this LMU,
- weed mapping shows a substantial increase in Council bushland in this LMU that has less than 5% weed cover, rising from 5% to 12% in just one year.

A number of factors place local government in a strong position to influence and facilitate integrated weed management.

The size of local government areas lend themselves to achievable, landscape scale projects. Local government areas are small enough for staff to understand and know well over a relatively short period of time. Knowledge of the local area includes familiarity with the distribution of weeds, high quality remnants and key pathways of weed threat. This enables planning that maximises use of available, limited resources. Staff have ready access to local information such maps and community group and resident contact details. Having that local knowledge lends itself to gaining the confidence of community groups and individual residents to participate in programs. Residents and community groups are our customers. We are in daily contact over a range of issues and have many opportunities to link people into networks and programs.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Yarra Ranges Council Bushland Team and Environment Department for their passion and hard work. The 20+ other public land management staff who work with us so co-operatively. The volunteers of 40 groups whose work contributes so much to conserving biodiversity in Yarra Ranges. The environmental contract staff who take pride in their work. The residents who want to make a difference on their own property.

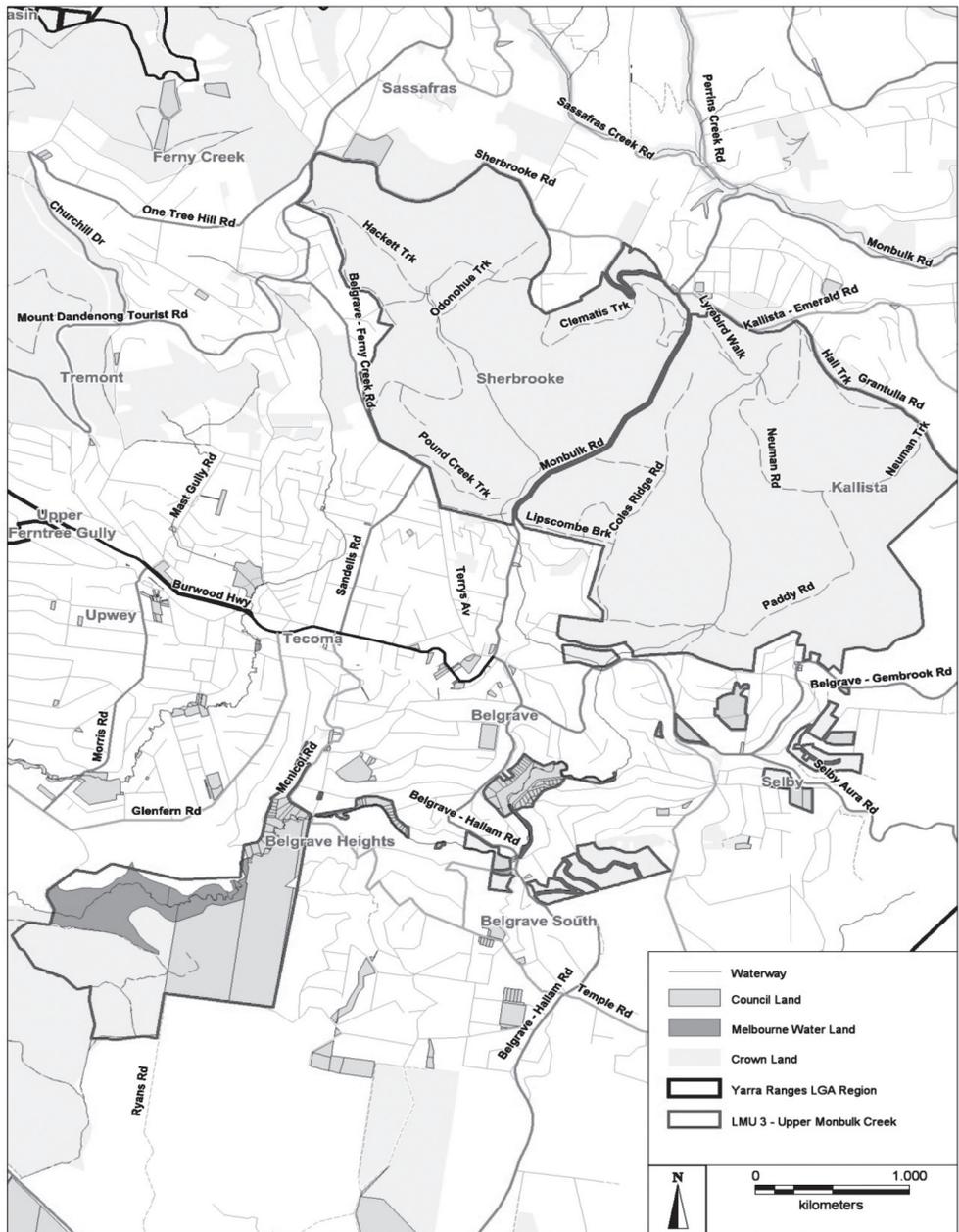


Figure 1. Upper Monbulk Creek Land Management Unit.