Community expectations: landholder point of view

Jean Moir, Farmer, Leongatha, Victoria3953, Australia.

Good farmers have very little contact with Land Protection Officers or weed scientists because we do our job and keep our land weed free. Staff from the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources are usually too busy dealing with problem properties to spend much time with clean farmers. I am sure that when research staff are looking for release sites they only come in contact with poor land managers with weed infested land.

That in itself is a pity because the agricultural industry needs to be aware of the success and failures that they have. Perhaps their work should be getting better publicity from the Department and be documented in a way all farmers can access and understand.

We farm in 40 inches of rainfall, highly fertile, steep hill country near Mirboo North in South Gippsland. Our major weed problems are ragwort, blackberry and thistles in that order. The cost of control to the agricultural industry is enormous. This cost has never been monitored but would be millions annually. In the Mirboo district, an area supervised by two Land Protection Officers, there are at least 160 problem properties covering 25 000 acres.

Our property is considered to be clean, but the cost of keeping it clean is $10 000 per year. The amount of chemical we use would be no more than $200 per year. But we have to ride and walk this steep country every month from September to June to pick up the odd ragwort, thistle and blackberry plants that germinate. If we do not do this, because of the prolific nature of the weeds, we would soon have a major problem. I have seen properties, traditionally spotless for maybe two or three generations, change hands and, with different management practices and poor weed control, become severely infested within three years.

Biological control will not help good farmers in the short term, because they do not have large weed infestations on their land, but in the long term, if we can obtain control biologically the benefits to the agricultural community and the environment would be inestimable. Unfortunately, not all farmers are good, and bad farmers can be the source of our seed bank. I would categorize the Government's farming pursuits as extremely poor and this is where biological control will create the largest community benefit. In the State and National Parks, control of weeds biologically would be of great benefit to our water quality, the environment and therefore the broader community.

Farmers with poor weed management practices in the past would enjoy increased pasture production, and financial gains to the agricultural community could be utilized in improved stock production, fencing, fertilizers and leisure time. Therefore the spin-offs would be of great benefit to broader areas. Rural communities would have a better acceptance of pine plantations if they became good neighbours and with an acceptable level of biological control we may be able to achieve that.

Many land managers use sheep successfully as a control method for ragwort. Well managed sheep properties never allow ragwort to flower. Although the sheep do not kill the ragwort plant they keep it eaten down. Therefore no seed is dispersed to neighbouring land. This method of control is totally acceptable to the community. Unfortunately the poor returns from sheep over the past ten years have seen a 40% decrease in sheep numbers.

If we had a biological method that could achieve similar results to a well managed flock of sheep this would be our salvation. The farming community would be delighted. We all loathe the necessity to handle chemicals and spending time polluting our land with chemicals. Successful biological control is the answer.

Biological control of Paterson's curse from a farmer's point of view

Sue Gall, Farmer, Euroa, Victoria 3666, Australia.

From a farmer's point of view we have almost dismissed biological control as a form of containing the weed Paterson's curse. It has been too long in coming and the results are not extensive enough. It is an immediate problem and we have to do something with it now.

Biological control will be most welcome as an aid, but we do not see it as an answer to total control. It would be a preferred method as it would be much cheaper and its adaptation to control in the hills and inaccessible areas would be a big bonus.

At the moment we see chemical control as the only real answer, followed by pasture establishment. No control works unless there is a follow-up or pasture establishment as the seed just regenerates a whole new crop the following year as there is no competition from pasture.

We would like to see a stronger push for biological control as it is cheaper to implement and environmentally friendly. Most farmers would prefer to avoid using chemicals if possible. We would like to see some positive results with the biological control to give us some encouragement that this is a workable solution.

There has not been enough information available to landholders on the progress of biological control. We are aware that limits in funding contribute to these delays and we feel there should be more emphasis on the problems of weed control generally.

Farmers themselves have a lot to answer for in the development of these noxious weed problems. They seem to wait until it becomes a massive problem before being forced into action to combat the spread of noxious weeds.

Where the insect has been developed to a satisfactory stage and it is safe to release, landholders should be more involved in the production of numbers of insects to enable the process to work at a faster rate.

As farmers, we seem to find funds available to us for tree planting and salinity control, and these are certainly important issues, but there is little or no funding for noxious weed control.

Paterson's curse has become an almost overwhelming problem. It has reduced vast tracts of useful farming land into areas drastically reduced in productivity. The areas worst affected and hardest to control are the hill areas and those inaccessible to vehicles.

We would like to see more information shared by the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the people involved in the biological control and the landholders themselves becoming much more involved. It is only with the co-operation and effort of all parties concerned that we can make any progress in our endeavour to eradicate this weed.