

Farmer involvement in noxious weeds policy making in Western
Australia

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SUMMARY

Farmers and pastoralists in Western Australia are directly involved in shaping policies for dealing with noxious weeds. The Agriculture and Related Resources Protection Act provides for Zone Control Authorities and Regional Advisory Committees made up of landholders' representatives. The declaration of weeds in several categories allows policies for prevention and control to be tailored to suit local circumstances.

The Skeleton Weed (Eradication Fund) Act was initiated by producer organizations specifically to finance the campaign to eradicate skeleton weed (*Chondrilla juncea*) through a levy on graingrowers. The approach is unique in Western Australia and its success has depended largely upon farmer participation through local committees.

The payment of a rate or levy to provide a central fund to meet the cost of control on private property has increased grower interest and progress in weed control.

THE AGRICULTURE PROTECTION BOARD AND ITS LEGISLATION

The Agriculture Protection Board

The Agriculture Protection Board (A.P.B.) in Western Australia was set up in 1950. It now has eleven members; the Chairman of the Board is, ex officio, The Director of Agriculture; the Deputy Chairman is the Board's Chief Executive Officer; the State Treasury is represented, and the other eight members represent the Farmers' Union (two), the Pastoralists and Graziers' Association (one) and the Country Shire Council's Association (five).

THE AGRICULTURE AND RELATED RESOURCES PROTECTION ACT

The Board administers the Agriculture and Related Resources Protection Act, which came into effect on 1 July 1976. This Act replaces the Vermin Act (1918) and the Noxious Weeds Act (1950). The Act provides for weeds to be declared as "declared plants", which replaces the term "noxious weeds".

Categorization concept

Under the Agriculture and Related Resources Protection Act the Board may assign declared plants to various categories which define the level of control required anywhere in the State. This categorization approach to weed control was first adopted by the Board in 1973 (Ritchie, 1973) but the concept had not previously been written into legislation. Declarations and the categories to which declared plants are assigned can apply to the whole State, to

particular Shires, or to defined areas down to individual locations. The categories defined in the Act are (with the A.P.B. common name for the category in brackets):

- P1: plants which cannot be introduced (prevention).
All declared plants are in this category, and in one of the following categories for a particular defined area:
- P2: plants which will be eradicated (eradication)
- P3: plants whose population will be reduced (control)
- P4: plants which will be prevented from spreading (containment)
- P5: plants which will be treated only on public or municipal land.

Zones and regions

For administrative purposes the State is divided into 10 zones. Five of these zones, each consisting of three Regions, cover the agricultural areas; four zones each of two regions cover the pastoral areas and the remaining zone encompasses the Perth metropolitan and outer metropolitan areas (see Figure 1).

The Act requires a Zone Control Authority to be established for each Zone and a Regional Advisory Committee for each Region. These are statutory bodies.

Members of Regional Advisory Committees are selected by the Agriculture Protection Board from lists of names submitted by the W.A. Farmers' Union, Pastoral and Graziers' Association and each Shire Council in the Region. The Committee's role is to advise and make recommendations to its Zone Control Authority.

Members of Zone Control Authorities are chosen by the Agriculture Protection Board from lists of members nominated by Regional Advisory Committees. Membership of the Zone Control Authority is limited to between six and nine, and its Chairman is a senior Agriculture Protection Board staff member. Another staff member is appointed to act as Executive Officer.

The powers, functions and duties of a Zone Control Authority are to:

- . ensure that the provisions of the Act are efficiently carried out within the Zone
- . achieve through the Executive Officer and his staff effective control of declared plants (and declared animals) in the Zone
- . formulate policies and schemes for carrying out the Act and to advise and make recommendations to the Agriculture Protection Board on their implementation, and
- . advise and make recommendations to the Agriculture Protection Board on spending funds.

Funding

The cost of administering the Act is paid from State Government funds. Thus the Government pays for administration,

Agriculture Protection Board of W.A. Administrative Structure

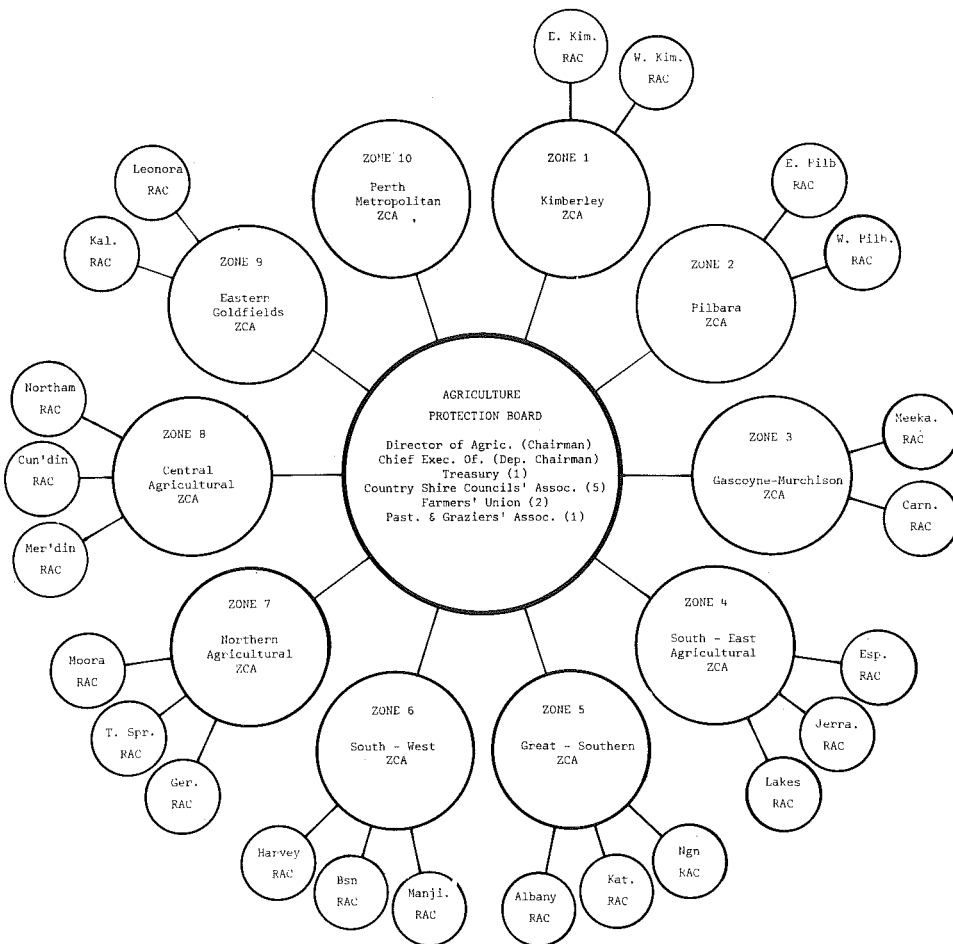


Figure 1

inspections, extension, staff training and for research.

In agricultural areas, control of declared plants is the legal and financial responsibility of the occupier. This applies to Government and municipal land as well as private land.

A rate is collected on pastoral leasehold land for declared plant control and is paid into a Declared Plant and Animal Control Fund. The State Government also contributes to this Fund. The Act provides that as from 1978/79 the Government will contribute an amount matching that raised by the rate. Despite the work paid for from the Fund, the legal responsibility for controlling declared plants remains with the landholder.

THE SKELETON WEED (ERADICATION FUND) ACT

Another Act, the Skeleton Weed (Eradication Fund) Act provides for a fund to be set up from farmers' contributions specifically to finance a campaign to eradicate skeleton weed. This measure was introduced by the State Government at the instigation of the Farmers' Union and Pastoralists and Graziers' Association. Each graingrower delivering more than 30 tonnes of grain pays a levy of \$30 to the fund for each year that the Act applies. The act was first introduced for a 3 year period beginning with the 1974/75 harvest. It has now been renewed for a further 3 years, again with the support of the farmers' organizations.

Farmers' Action Committees have been set up in three districts where skeleton weed occurs, centred at Narembeen, Pithara and Geraldton. These Committees are not statutory. They consist of interested local farmers representing the Farmers' Union, Pastoralists and Graziers' Association and Shire Councils.

The Action Committees operate as a communication link between the Agriculture Protection Board's staff and the local farming community. The Committees help to organize the parties of farmer volunteers who are used to search for the weed.

DISCUSSION

Farmer involvement

The make-up of the membership of the Agriculture Protection Board provides one avenue by which farmers' organizations can influence policy making on noxious weeds. The representatives of the Farmers' Union and the Pastoralists and Graziers' Association on the Board report back to their farmer members on the Board's decisions. In turn, the Board members convey farmers' opinions, and sometimes grievances, to the Board.

Similarly, Country Shire Councils' Association members report to their organization which is a body representative of Shire Councils from the rural areas of the State.

The general principle is that the Agriculture Protection Board is an industry Board charged with the responsibility for providing agriculture protection on a State-wide basis. The Board looks to Zone Control Authorities for recommendations on matters of particular local concern and these bodies in turn receive advice

from Regional Advisory Committees. The structure is aimed at providing for decentralized farmer involvement in the policy making process, while still allowing for a State authority co-ordinate effort.

The Zone Control Authorities have operated for some twelve months now and some observations can be made on their approach.

Zone Control Authorities in pastoral areas can have a greater influence than those in the agricultural areas, because of the different way in which weed control work is financed in the two cases. Pastoral Zones draw up budgets for control work to be financed from the Declared Plant and Animal Control Fund. The Zone Control Authority must decide its priorities, firstly between declared animal and declared plant control. Having decided what proportion of its funds to spend on weeds the Z.C.A. then budgets for control programs on the various declared plants in the area, according, firstly, to its view of their relative impact or potential impact on the pastoral industry and, secondly, on the practicalities of controlling them.

The advent of the Agriculture and Related Resources Protection Act, its Zonal control concept and the Control Fund has led to a marked upsurge in pastoralists' interest in weed control. Whereas the pastoral community had earlier been preoccupied with vermin control, particularly wild dogs, there is now much more awareness of the threat posed by weeds such as mesquite (*Prosopis juliflora*), parkinsonia (*Parkinsonia aculeata*) and calotropis (*Calotropis procera*).

This is reflected in the proportion of the Control Fund being allocated to weed control. In addition, individual pastoralists are implementing control programs at their own expense, which is being encouraged by the A.P.B.'s District Officers.

In agricultural areas, the Zone Control Authorities do not have a direct stake in budgeting for, and spending money on, control. This is up to the individual landholders. But the Authorities are active in making recommendations on the declarations of weeds.

Recommendations by Zone Control Authorities that weeds should be declared under the Act, or that existing weed declarations be cancelled, are referred to the A.P.B.'s Weeds Committee. This Committee includes Board members, senior professional Board staff and Weed Agronomists from the Department of Agriculture. The Committee in turn recommends to the Board.

The general aim is to follow an eradication approach wherever this is feasible. Recognized problem weeds such as skeleton weed, yellow burr weed (*Amsinckia* spp.), water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*) and salvinia (*Salvinia molesta*) all have been placed in the P2 (eradication) category.

If a weed has become too well established in an area for eradication to be a sensible short or medium term aim, a declaration is made in the P3 (control) category. This approach is adopted with saffron thistle (*Carthamus lanatus*) and cape tulip (*Homeria miniata* and *H. breyniana*) in many areas. The containment approach is adopted where no satisfactory practical method of control is

available for broadacre control, as with soursob (*Oxalis pes-caprae*), or where a plant is of no economic significance in one area but could be a potential problem elsewhere, as is the position with Paterson's curse (*Echium plantagineum*).

The declaration of plants in categories allows control policies to be tailored to suit varying circumstances and needs. Because of this flexibility the Board has been able to adopt most Zone Control Authority recommendations on plant declarations.

Recent declarations resulting from Authority and Committee initiatives include:

- . gazettal of dock (*Rumex* sp.) in the P2 (eradication) category for one region in the northern wheatbelt
- . categorizing of double gee (*Emex australis*) in P5 for railway yards and saleyards in a northern wheatbelt area in an attempt to limit the spread of the weed into clean areas from these obvious distribution points
- . placing of pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium*) in the P4 (containment) category in a south coastal shire to contain the weed and prevent spread because the weed has become of greater significance with the advent of whole milk production in the district
- . cancellation of the declaration of carnation weed (*Euphorbia terracina*) in one agricultural zone where it did not pose a threat to agriculture, and
- . inclusion of stemless thistle (*Onopordum acaulon*) in P2 (eradication) category for whole State following discovery of few isolated infestations.

The involvement of farmers in agricultural areas through the Authority and Committee system also has resulted in greater interest being taken in quarantine and in early action against small infestations of potential problem weeds. The interest in quarantine is of particular importance to Western Australia which has remained virtually free of serious weeds such as Noogoora burr (*Xanthium pungens*), Bathurst burr (*Xanthium spinosum*) and horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*) but is under constant threat of weed introduction on livestock or in agricultural produce.

The farming community has been actively involved in the campaign to eradicate skeleton weed for 4 years now. Periodically throughout the summer, farmer volunteers continue to search for the weed on infested and adjacent suspect areas. These searches are planned and co-ordinated by A.P.B. staff from the skeleton weed project team, in conjunction with the Farmers' Action Committee.

A concerted extension and publicity effort by the Board has apparently been successful in making farmers aware of, and concerned about, the potential economic loss which skeleton weed could cause if it were allowed to establish in Western Australia. During a survey in 1975 (Sexton, 1976), a sample of 155 farmers were asked their opinion about skeleton weed establishing in their district. A total of 68% said it would cause serious falls in their income, a further 15% said it would force some farmers off the land.

To the end of 1977, 44 farm infestations of skeleton weed had been recorded in Western Australia. The significant fact is that of the infestations reported since the eradication campaign commenced, virtually all have been reported by farmers and all have consisted of small stands. This feat must be attributed to farmer involvement through action committees and to the extension effort.

CONTRIBUTION TOWARDS COST

Experience to-date has suggested that grower interest in weed control is greatly increased where a contribution in the form of a rate or levy is made to a central fund to meet the cost of control on private property. Under these circumstances greater interest has been shown in actual control work at a property level. This has been evidenced by the change in attitudes of pastoralists towards weed control and by the backing the skeleton weed eradication effort has gained in the agricultural areas. The setting of definite objectives is also possible and progress is being made in attaining objectives as can be seen with the results achieved towards skeleton weed eradication.

Where a rate is not levied, as in the agricultural areas, grower advisory and recommending bodies are involved in overall policy making but are not able to become closely involved in the direction of actual field control. Greater progress can be envisaged if a contributory source of revenue were available to allow for co-ordinated programs on all properties.

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