Planning for improved weed management in Victoria

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Summary As in other States, Territories and the Commonwealth over recent years, increased emphasis has been given in Victoria to strategic planning. This paper describes the design, approach and goals adopted for weed management planning in Victoria within an integrated planning framework. Formal plans for weed management have been encouraged at various scales encompassing State, regional, local and farm/park levels. The scope is broad, and although focusing on identifying the priority declared species, most plans also deal with agricultural and environmental species. In addition, specific species action plans have been created at regional or State scale. The context varies with the State plan developed within a Pest Management Framework, and the regional plans within a natural resource catchment management strategy. Complementary State Frameworks have been developed for Native Vegetation and Private Forestry.

Extensive community consultation has been the hallmark of the Victorian approach to ensure awareness, ownership and commitment to shared outcomes.

Keywords Strategy, plans, community consultation.

INTRODUCTION

Weeds impact adversely on all aspects of land and water management and many aspects of our lives. Internationally, the impact of pest invasions is recognised as the second greatest threat to biodiversity (behind land clearing) and within Australia and Victoria by Landcare groups as the number one or amongst the major issues of concern. So entrenched are weed problems that no amount of Government and community expenditure will eradicate all weeds in all situations. How then can we ensure that Government and community investment is targeted to the most worthwhile issues?

One critical method of overcoming past reactive approaches to weed management is planning – 'failure to plan is planning to fail'! In government programs a planned approach is required to justify resource allocation, specify outcomes and provide accountability for achievements and expenditure. In public programs requiring community involvement, consultation and participation in planning is vital to ensure improved awareness, ownership and commitment to agreed outcomes by the affected community groups and individuals (Wilson *et al.* 1999). Effective planning can achieve these objectives for government and the community.

ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

The need for government intervention in weed management has long been recognised. 'Noxious weed' laws have been enacted in Australian States dating back to 1851. Despite these laws, the numbers of weed species naturalising and their impacts are increasing. The implementation of the legislation and the targeting of weed management require substantial improvement. Landowners generally will act to control those weeds that are having an obvious impact on their use of the land. They are less likely to limit the growth and spread of plants that impose no burden on them, but which could impact on neighbouring productive or conservation land uses. In such cases, government intervention may be warranted. It could take the form of legislation to require action, or advice and incentives to encourage control, or conducting research or awareness campaigns to improve knowledge or combinations of these measures.

In Victoria, the *Catchment and Land Protection Act* is the key law regarding weed management. It provides for the declaration of plants as noxious weeds if they are, or have the potential to become, a serious threat to primary production, the environment or community health in Victoria. Responsibility is placed on landowners to control and prevent the spread of noxious weeds from their properties. The Act authorises the inspection of properties and provides for controls on the movement of machinery and the sale of livestock and farm produce that may contain seeds of noxious weeds. It also provides for restrictions on the sale of noxious weeds and their seeds. The Act allows for the placement of weeds in four categories allowing differing measures to be taken at State, regional and local level, e.g. eradication, preventing spread or restricting commercial trade.

A Victorian Catchment Management Council (VCMC) and 10 regional Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) are appointed and have a key role in planning and co-ordination of land and water management, including weed management. They advise the Minister on priorities and resource

allocation. The State Department of Natural Resources and Environment (NRE) administers the Act. Other than as land managers, Shires have no formal role in weed management.

PLANNING CONTEXT

Natural resource management A range of National and State strategies and frameworks provide the context in which weed management planning occurs. Key policy documents are the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (2000), and the National Weeds Strategy (1997). In Victoria 10 Regional Catchment Strategies are currently being reviewed within the context of the National Action Plan. The National Weeds Strategy was developed over many years before release, and provides goals and guiding principles for weed management in Australia that have been taken up in all subsequent State and regional strategies and plans (e.g. Wilson *et al.* 1999, Bishop and Harradine 1999).

At the State level, key policy documents are Victoria's Biodiversity (1997), Victorian Pest Management – A Framework for Action (VPMF) (2002), Draft Native Vegetation Framework (2000), Draft Private Forestry Strategy (2002), and Draft River Health Strategy (2002).

State weed management planning The Victorian Weeds Strategy, originally released in 1999, has been reviewed and redeveloped as the Victorian Weed Management Strategy (VWMS), a component of the VPMF that received Government endorsement in April 2002. The development of the VPMF was overseen by an NRE Steering Committee under the guidance of the VCMC. Consultants were employed to consult widely with peak stakeholders at State and regional level to identify issues and explore options. The draft documents were released for public comment over a two-month period. Of the 136 written submissions received, many offered views about weed management.

The VWMS has a three-five year timeframe under which an annual 'Business Plan' is developed. The Business Plan is developed in conjunction with and endorsed by the CMAs and implemented through NRE's Plan/Deploy/Review annual business cycle. The VWMS has five goals and 18 objectives. It defines 50 strategic actions to implement the objectives and achieve the goals. In keeping with the National Weeds Strategy, the goals are stated as:

- prevent new weed problems;
- a significant reduction in impact of existing weed problems;
- a Victorian community that is fully aware of the ecological, social and environmental impacts and threat of weeds, and has the knowledge to act to minimise their damage;
- effective working partnerships built for progressive weed management; and
- continuous improvement through review and evaluation.

In addition to the Victorian Strategy, specific plans have been drawn up for priority species such as serrated tussock, blackberry, ragwort and gorse, three of which are Weeds of National Significance.

Regional weed management planning Concurrent with the development of the National Weeds Strategy in 1997 and the Regional Catchment Strategies in 1997, the Parliament of Victoria conducted an 'Inquiry into Weeds' and reported in 1998. Each of these influenced the development of the Victorian Weeds Strategy (1999) and the Regional Weed Action Plans (RWAPs). As weeds were in the top three issues identified in the 10 Regional Catchment Strategies across the State, the RWAP development was strongly supported by the CMAs and NRE with some funding support through the Natural Heritage Trust.

Extensive community consultation occurred in the development of the RWAPs. Techniques included representative steering committees, focus groups with key stakeholders, public meetings, targeted discussions with peak groups and consideration of written submissions following the release of draft documents. Most were officially 'launched' and news releases advised regional communities of the two-month consultation period. The involvement of each CMA's several Community Implementation Committees in finalising the documents was critical in ensuring community ownership. At the time of writing, seven RWAPS have been released, with the remaining three virtually completed and being prepared for printing.

While the scope of the RWAPs is broad, consideration being given to agricultural and environmental weeds in both terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, the focus is necessarily on declared weeds. The plans identify priority weeds and the locations and circumstances where action is required. They delineate responsibilities, encourage co-operative action and specify objectives to be achieved. Species action plans for the priority species provide this information at a finer level of detail. Some regions have developed sub-regional weed action plans with affected communities. Involvement of these communities has brought about a change in attitude from initial reticence and suspicion, to improved understanding, ownership and commitment to action on priorities.

These regional, sub-regional and species action plans provide the guidance for the development of

local plans at the Shire, Landcare group, park and property level.

ACHIEVEMENTS

This commitment to planning over the last six years in Victoria has resulted in a number of substantial achievements:

1. **Risk assessment** A process of weed risk assessment has been developed involving an assessment of current and potential distribution, impact and rate of spread, and a process for group decision-making. This is described elsewhere by Weiss and McLaren (2002).

2. **Focus on new and emerging weeds** Early detection and rapid response to new high-impact weeds is now accepted as a priority for NRE service delivery. A formal Rapid Response Plan is currently being finalised. Risk assessment and early detection are two relatively new areas of research activity that have been stimulated in response to planning needs. Action has taken place in recent years on Mexican feather grass or white tussock (*Nassella tenuissima* (Trin.) Barkworth), Texas needlegrass (*Nassella leucotricha* (Trin. & Rupr.) R.W.Pohl), Senegal tea or temple plant (*Gymnocoronis spilanthoides* DC.) and orange hawkweed (*Hieracium aurantiacum* L.). In addition a project funded in partnership with the Weed Society of Victoria has enabled a huge backlog of exotic species collections to be catalogued and entered into the records database at the National Herbarium in Melbourne.

3. **Improved liaison** New processes have been developed to harmonise projects on public and private land in tune with priorities in the RWAPs (see Dennis 2002). These processes have improved the liaison between agencies and between public and private land managers.

4. **Support for community-driven plans** Three species-specific plans (serrated tussock, ragwort and gorse) implemented under the guidance of community-driven Task Forces have strong support from NRE advisory and enforcement officers, with financial support from the State Government's Second Generation Landcare grants scheme.

5. **Recognition of holistic land management** Regional Catchment Strategies address all aspects of land and water management at the catchment scale. Second Generation Landcare grants provide funding support for groups and networks addressing projects that integrate solutions for various land management issues including weeds.

6. **Community involvement** Participation in determining priorities and solutions has lead to increased understanding, ownership and commitment by regional and local communities.

7. **Compliance** It has become clear that once priorities and objectives are set and agreed through participatory processes, the communities are not prepared to tolerate lack of action by landowners. NRE's enforcement program has been substantially increased to ensure a high level of compliance in priority areas. The commitment by public land managers to strategic weed management and regional priorities is also under close scrutiny by the community.

DISCUSSION

Two key issues remain that stand in the way of further progress in the integration of strategic weed management into broader natural resource management. Further work is required on these resource allocation issues.

Risk management Whilst mechanisms are being developed to address the economic aspects of risk management (see Weiss *et al.* 2002), there is no accepted mechanism yet for comparing threats and risks for environmental and social aspects, nor between the various forms of land degradation, e.g. salinity, weeds, vegetation loss, rabbits or water quality.

Funding support The lack of complementary strategic focus between Commonwealth and States has lead to a 'cargo cult' in some community groups. Opportunistic bidding by some 'well-connected' groups has lead to unco-ordinated action, distraction from regional priorities and the questioning of the continued contribution to, and value of, strategic planning by the community.

CONCLUSION

The commitment to strategic planning in Victoria is beginning to pay off. In weed management there is a growing acceptance that there is no easy way, but that sustained co-operative effort can minimise the impacts even of long-established, entrenched weed problems. The willingness of Community Task Forces to develop and implement strategic plans over a period of years is enormously encouraging. The gradual movement away from reaction to 'loud voices and squeaky wheels', towards a risk management, holistic land management

approach is becoming obvious and accepted. Hopefully, strategic planning of weed management will accelerate that trend and pay lasting dividends for the Victorian and Australian communities in the future.

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