Towards cooperative national arrangements for weed spread prevention – the saga continues

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Summary Requirements for managing the spread of weeds vary between jurisdictions, as do the policy, educational and operational arrangements necessary to address the issue. No person or organisation is completely free of responsibility within statutory or common law. However, the ability to prevent weed spread is hindered by the complexity of management arrangements and the difficulty in translating these to effective on-ground actions.

This paper describes an ongoing cooperative national planning process, which builds from previous work (Barker 2005) and aims to:

- Identify and prioritise weed spread prevention activities;
- Identify and restrict pathways for weed spread;
- Achieve national consistency in weed spread prevention; and
- Complement the review of the National Weeds Strategy.

Keywords Weed spread prevention, Australian Weeds Strategy, planning, national cooperation.

INTRODUCTION

The need for a national approach to weed spread prevention is reflected within the principles embedded in the 'National Weeds Strategy' (Anon. 1999) and more recently in the Senate Committee Report 'Turning back the tide – the invasive species challenge' (Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts References Committee 2004). It was also the main outcome of the 'Strategic Analysis and Scoping Study on Human Spread of Weeds' (Barker 2005), which ascertained the effectiveness of weed spread prevention tools and provided the basis for initiating the project described in this paper. Tools assessed in the study included policies, legislation, procedures, infrastructure, awareness material and other processes developed to prevent or minimise weed spread.

The scoping study's intent was to determine, through consultation with government, industry and other organisations, what activities were effective in minimising (or preventing) weed spread. The study methods were twofold: 1) a workshop involving participants across Australia from industry, government and the community; and 2) a national questionnaire surveying opinions of organisations impacted by weed spread.

The major findings were:

- Government, industry and other organisations are committed to preventing weed spread;
- There is a lack of objective measures to evaluate tools;
- No one tool was seen as effective across Australia and only a few tools were identified at the State/Territory level; and
- If a tool was seen as ineffective it could not be determined whether this was due to the tool itself or lack of resources to implement.

The major recommendations from the study were:

- States and Territories to develop consistent and complementary measures to prevent weed spread;
- Weed spread prevention measures need to be adequately resourced to ensure both voluntary and regulatory compliance;
- A national strategy and implementation plan be developed to assist States and Territories in developing common, consistent and complementary measures for weed spread prevention; and
- A national coordinator be appointed to facilitate the development of this strategy.

DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

To ensure the success of the project three key requirements were identified:

- Adequate funding and other resources to undertake the process and ongoing resource requirements to be a component of any outcome;
- An efficient and appropriate consultation process; and
- Long-term ownership and leadership of the outcomes of the process.

Resources Funding to develop a draft national weed spread prevention strategy/plan was provided under the Weeds of National Significance, Natural Heritage Trust 2003–2006 initiative, with additional funds and in-kind support provided by each State and Territory with exception of the Australian Capital Territory. The requirement for obtaining long-term funding and resources to implement weed spread prevention measures was identified by Barker (2005) and will be

a key outcome, with suggested management actions, in the final document.

Consultation An important component of the project is the consultation process. The process needed to ascertain from stakeholders appropriate national measures to minimise weed spread and to promote long-term ownership of any outcomes.

To date the consultation process has involved a series of focus groups of key stakeholders with the aim of developing a draft strategy. The Australian Weeds Committee (AWC) will review the draft strategy and then decide if a public consultation process is required. This committee provides a forum for weed issues to be addressed at a national level and has representatives from each State and Territory and the Australian Government, CSIRO and the CRC for Australian Weed Management. It is also the committee that is reviewing the National Weeds Strategy, which will be released as the Australian Weeds Strategy. The final public consultation phase will depend on the process used for releasing the Australian Weeds Strategy.

To determine participants in the focus groups, a stakeholder list was developed and the steering committee member representing each State, Territory or the Australian Government invited relevant stakeholders from this list to attend a focus group in their area. Focus groups were held in each State and Territory with approximately 150 participants representing:

- Government agencies responsible for managing pests and government land;
- A range of industries including the resources sector (mining, energy), agriculture (crops, grain, livestock), forestry, nurseries, contractors and game harvesters;
- Natural resource management groups;
- Other community organisations; and
- Research organisations.

To assist in running focus groups a model strategy/plan was developed based on the outcomes of Barker (2005). The model provided background information on the need for coordinated action, major pathways and suggested a vision, objectives, goals, outcomes and management actions. The decision to use focus groups and a model plan/strategy was based on the need to provide direction but still encourage idea generation and testing.

The focus group process involved firstly a series of questions aimed at identifying participants' expectations on any strategy/plan developed, other national approaches that could be used, and what was required for them to actively use the final strategy/plan. This exercise was followed by a session that enabled assumptions and methods identified previously in Barker (2005) and by steering committee members to be tested and new methods identified.

At the end of each focus group meeting, participants were asked their opinion of the process used. There was overwhelming agreement that the process was appropriate, considering the complexity of the issue, the consultation required, and the time frame for each focus group (1 day).

Ownership To assist in gaining ownership by State, Territory and Australian Governments, endorsement was sought from the AWC. In-principle support for the project was gained in 2005 with representatives on the AWC nominating the members of the project steering committee. In April 2006 the AWC agreed to take ownership of the process with the final document to be an implementation plan under the Australian Weeds Strategy (the name given to the reviewed National Weeds Strategy). The implementation plan is due by June 2006 with a more detailed analysis of the process and outcomes provided in the presentation at the conference.

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