

Local government is a vital cog in the weed management engine: lessons learnt in New South Wales

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Summary Weed management in New South Wales (NSW) is a multi-stakeholder exercise shared between government agencies, statutory and other bodies and the community. Local government has been a key partner in ensuring weed management happens on-ground since 1906. Under the NSW *Noxious Weeds Act 1993* (the Act), local government shares these responsibilities with the Department of Primary Industries.

In a long partnership, refined with time, local government leads the operational and compliance aspects of enforcing the Act, conducting inspections, and controlling weeds on land under their control. Importantly, it develops and implements regional and local strategies and policies that enhance state and national initiatives, as well as providing education, training and resources for the public. Complementing this, the state government is responsible for legislation, state and national policy and strategy development, technical review, state coordination, and providing education and training for weed managers. Together, local and state government play a role in weed risk assessment, the development of weed management resources and funding these initiatives, as well as managing weeds on a regional basis.

This paper examines 14 of the most important lessons that we have learnt together through this century of partnership. These include the importance of good relationships between stakeholders, communication, training and devolved decision making, the need to be adaptable to change and how the pooling of knowledge, experience and innovation is invaluable in achieving outcomes. We propose that the lessons learnt in NSW can be used to improve multi-stakeholder weed management coordination across Australia and globally.

Keywords Change management, communication, representation, training and development.

INTRODUCTION

Weed management in New South Wales (NSW) is a multi-stakeholder exercise and involves local government; State government departments responsible for primary industries, the environment, and Crown lands; statutory bodies such as Catchment Management Authorities and the Livestock Health and Pest Authorities; and, importantly, landholders/occupiers and the general community. Among these stakeholders, two are key in achieving integrated weed management outcomes across the state. The first is local government, with individual councils or shires known as local control authorities (LCAs) under the NSW *Noxious Weeds Act 1993* (the Act). The other key stakeholder is the NSW Department of Primary Industries (DPI).

This paper examines 14 of the most important lessons LCAs and NSW DPI have learnt by working together in a partnership that dates from 1906. We propose that these lessons can be used to improve multi-stakeholder weed management coordination across Australia and globally.

THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSONS WE HAVE LEARNT: CHANGE MANAGEMENT

106 years of change management Change management is all about shifting people from current practice to some desired way of doing things in the future. Effective, but periodic change management has occurred in weed management in NSW since 1906, despite the term 'change management' having only been recognised in the last 30 years. For example, while the NSW government provides nearly \$9 million in funding for weed management annually, NSW DPI has recently devolved much of this funding to regional weed advisory committees (partnerships of LCAs and other stakeholders) through the Weeds Action Program (WAP). Committees have now taken on a much stronger role in resource allocation, program

management and outcome reporting, particularly for new and emerging weeds.

While regional committees have existed for many years as a network of like-minded stakeholders to share professional experience and knowledge, their additional new role as project administrators has resulted in some adjustments. For example, regional committees and their lead agencies have devoted significant effort to the development of administrative policies and processes—activities that regional committees have not undertaken before. While adapting to this new system was a difficult process, most regional committees now feel that they have successfully created a process and overall weed management program that suits all stakeholders.

Being willing to try something different Weed officers in NSW are innovative, highly skilled natural resource management professionals. They rapidly adopt technology including Toughbook computers (rugged shockproof laptops), Global Position System technology and various mapping applications, as well as investigating new technologies such as unmanned helicopters for applying herbicides in less accessible areas. Integrally involved in legislative compliance, they advise NSW DPI on both operational difficulties and deficiencies, addressing these in their education programs, often before legislative change is possible. Whether through print, radio, TV or other media/publications these ‘change-embracing’ officers continue to successfully engage the community in a changing society (Johnson 2011).

CLEARLY DEFINED ROLES

Knowing ‘who’s who in the zoo’ As the lead agency for weed management, NSW DPI is responsible for the overall implementation of the NSW Invasive Species Plan (ISP) 2008–2015. Consistent with the Australian Weeds Strategy, the ISP was developed to improve the management of all invasive species.

Under the ISP, NSW DPI is responsible for all aspects of legislative, policy, technical, state coordination, and state education and training for weed management. NSW DPI enacts legislative management of weeds through the Act. Local Control Authorities (LCAs) partner with NSW DPI in the enactment of this legislation. Individual councils or shires can be Local Control Authorities, as can groups of neighbouring councils and/or shires, collectively known as weeds county councils or weed authorities. Local Control Authorities are responsible for the implementation of weed control under the Act. This includes all operational aspects such as enforcing the Act, conducting inspections and controlling weeds on LCA managed

lands. It also involves developing regional and local weed strategies and policies (often the relevant Catchment Management Authority weed strategy), and providing regional and local education, training and resources for both the public and staff. This successful collaboration and cooperation comes from being certain of one’s role.

COMMUNICATION

The best relationships are built on good communication It takes time to develop relationships and this often involves meeting together and talking face-to-face. Weed management in NSW involves people who have been in the industry for a long time, often for their whole careers. Regional weed advisory committees which include wider networks of fellow weed officers, NSW DPI staff and other stakeholder contacts help foster good relationships, allow for smoother consultation processes, reduce the ‘us and them’ mentality and reduce the isolation of weed officers.

Integrated weed management is about managing weeds **and** people. As such, many weed officers are also managing people to ensure that good weed management occurs on the ground.

SUPPORT

Financial resourcing Good integrated weed management costs money. Much of the \$9 million invested annually by the NSW government goes to on-ground staffing and management activities. Local government invests at least twice this amount annually as well as seeking Australian government funding for strategic works. Even so, there is not enough money to go around and strategic allocation and prioritisation of works is needed. Having said this, without these allocations, weed management outcomes would be far worse for industry, the environment and communities across NSW.

State and regional coordination Good leadership enhances change. NSW DPI has a strong history of providing support and technical advice through regional invasive species officers. In addition, specialist positions or resourcing has been allocated where there is particular need. For example, NSW DPI currently funds a freshwater aquatic weed management coordinator to minimise the potentially huge impact aquatic weeds could have should they spread further from largely coastal areas. Similarly, NSW DPI staff time has been dedicated to training weed officers and other stakeholders to risk assess and prioritise weeds for management using the NSW Weed Risk Management system (Johnson and Charlton 2010).

Technical support drives change Many skills are needed to ensure successful integrated weed management. One example is accurate identification of new and unknown plant species. For this reason, NSW DPI together with the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage employed a specialist weed botanist based at the National Herbarium of NSW (Dr Andrew Perkins). Among the many significant outcomes, Dr Perkins determined the identity of, and informed the NSW response to *Solanum viarum* Dunal (Tropical soda apple) incursions (e.g. Charlton *et al.* 2012). The identification of 88 plant species through the Botanical Information Service including at least four new weed records for NSW, extensive fieldwork and updating plant descriptions, photographs and information in databases were also significant outcomes.

Providing a specialised botanist for weed identification purposes validated the important work weed officers undertake. This allowed for professional acknowledgement of the skills weed officers may have already possessed. The herbarium is an important resource for weed officers requiring formal identification of plants and better access has inspired higher levels of use.

THINKING GLOBALLY, ACTING LOCALLY

Local plans for local action Allowing local government to prioritise and allocate funding for weed management through the WAP is already resulting in better outcomes. Some of the many advantages of local decision making, coordinated at a regional level, have been: a drive for increased cooperation among stakeholders on a tenure blind catchment basis (J. Sanders, pers. comm.); innovation in mapping and weed recording applications; the standardisation of inspectorial and compliance paperwork; rationalisation of administrative procedures and costs; the prioritisation, identification of and more rapid response to new weed incursions and weed spread pathways; and better monitoring, reporting and evaluation of programs.

There are many examples of great regional cooperation. One is the management of *Chrysanthemoides monilifera* ssp. *rotundata* (DC.) Norl. (bitou bush) at Redhead Beach in Lake Macquarie on the NSW central coast. That project aimed to enhance natural beach regeneration by managing bitou bush, responsible for dune blowouts. Over four days up to seven different LCA staff and five spray units treated nine kilometres of beach frontage. A measure of the success of that project is that further funding has been made available by Lake Macquarie City Council to conduct similar projects.

The advantages of regional weed advisory committees, weed county councils and weed authorities Weed county councils and weed authorities are groups of councils that voluntarily work together to achieve weed management across their areas. Such arrangements extend to 40 of the 151 local government areas in NSW (26%). Some of the advantages include the pooling of knowledge and experience to achieve better results than can be achieved by acting alone, and resource sharing with the purchase or use of more specialised equipment which may be out of the price range of individual LCAs. This enables weed management programs to be conducted more efficiently and effectively.

Employ the right people to do the job Recruitment and retention of the people with a local focus, combined with local prioritisation and action, allows consistency in weed management. Weed management is often a long term process with some programs taking 20–50 years to complete. Local government is in a better position to ensure programs are consistent over such long timeframes.

Successful on-ground weed management also requires good relationships between the weed officer, the landholder or occupier and the wider community. This is often improved when the landholder or occupier knows that the weed officer is a local, living in the same community, relying on (often) the same prosperous agricultural industries that the landholder does. This applies equally across inspections, enforcement and education.

REPRESENTATION

Effective representation The Noxious Weeds Advisory Committee (NWAC) was established to provide a forum for consultation on the management of (noxious) weeds in NSW and to advise the Minister on aspects of management, funding allocations and declarations. Weed officers are employed by both councils and shires in NSW and both have a seat on the committee. Weed officer representation is also enhanced as NSW DPI regularly attends and contributes to regional weed advisory committee meetings held each quarter. Together, we listen to each other and what the other is asking for, so that on-ground and state initiatives are mutually recognised and supported.

A strong representative voice The Weed Officer Association (WOA) of NSW is a strong representative voice for weed officers with around 130 members. The WOA is integrally involved in decision making at a state level, with members on NWAC sub-committees. The WOA provided coordinated policy responses to

legislative changes and reviews (recently for example the five year statutory review of the *Noxious Weeds Act 1993*, and the NSW government review of Live-stock Health and Pest Authorities and the *Rural Lands Protection Act 1998*); and took part in consultation on declaration decisions as key stakeholders.

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Training helps change happen Early on the “councils still believed weeds officers only sprayed weeds” (Rees 2002) and did not need further training. Importantly, attitudes have changed since then and now weed officers are integrally involved in planning, integrated weed management, compliance, education and, more broadly, vegetation management on a whole-of-landscape approach. This professional culture change has helped a number of weed officers move into management positions (R. Carter, pers. comm.).

A skills analysis and recognition program for local government weed officers was initiated in 1998. Participating in subsequent programs, many weed officers have been awarded a Certificate IV in Conservation and Land Management qualification (some entirely through prior learning). Such outcomes have continued so that in 2011, 2 weed officers were awarded Certificate II, 11 were awarded Certificate IV, 21 a Diploma and 11 Advanced Diploma qualifications.

Learning and celebrating success together The biennial NSW weeds conference is a formal opportunity to gather and learn from each other, to network and to share information. Weed officers are both trained and encouraged to present conference papers so that successful and innovative approaches to weed management are communicated more widely. Good news is also celebrated formally through the Buerckner and Stephenson awards for on-ground weed management, and planning or coordination of weed management, respectively. Formal training opportunities run by NSW DPI staff including an induction program for new weed officers also allow joint learning.

There are many other informal opportunities to learn from each other, for example at regional weed advisory committee meetings, departmental or local government weed field days and field trips. Although not formally quantified, it appears that visits to central

Queensland by many north, central and south western NSW weed officers has led to a large increase in detections of *Parthenium hysterophorus* L. Similar outcomes were evidenced for aquatic weeds after a tour of officers to coastal areas.

SOME FINAL COMMENTS

The partnership between NSW DPI and local government has been sustained over many years due to the reliance each has on the other. NSW DPI needs the local approach of local government weed officers to enforce on-ground weed management. Local government needs the support of policy makers in NSW DPI to create a consistent framework within which weed management can occur. Local government is a vital cog in the NSW weed management engine together with NSW DPI.

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