

## Community engagement for reviewing declared weed policies: how South Australia encourages meaningful input into decision making processes

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**Summary** During the first comprehensive review of plants declared under weeds legislation in South Australia in 20 years, undertaking community engagement has bestowed a wealth of lessons in building ownership, community confidence, responsible governance and promoting voluntary compliance. Community engagement parameters were set and communication made clear about the phased approach to informing, consulting and involving land managers, primary producers, the nursery and garden industry and community groups. Nevertheless the task has been challenging across four public consultation periods seeking input on more than 150 policies. The requirements of eight Natural Resources Management regions were met, with consideration given to: complexity of the proposed changes for each region; remoteness; internet access; diversity in the expectations of local communities; the most effective communication channels; and other relevant community issues affecting weed management.

With input from experienced weed managers, policy makers and community engagement professionals, a strategic approach with well-defined evaluation measures was developed. Some of the most successful activities have been: engaging early with key industries and peak bodies; tailoring media releases to particular sectors and/or media opportunities; using web statistics to measure the use of 'Have Your Say' webpages; recording feedback on all weeds suggested for weed risk assessment and declaration throughout the review; attending community meetings before and after public consultation periods; and partnering with gardening show hosts to include talkback and SMS feedback opportunities.

**Keywords** Community engagement, declared plants, weeds, public consultation, natural resources management, South Australia.

### INTRODUCTION

Declared weeds pose a risk to primary industries, the natural environment and public health and safety. In South Australia weeds are declared under the *Natural Resources Management Act 2004* (NRM Act) for the purposes of control, destruction, notification of infestations, and prohibiting movement and/or sale. Declaration of weeds provides legal support for regional management plans. The eight regional Natural Resources Management (NRM) boards in South Australia seek voluntary compliance for the management of declared weeds and pursue enforcement according to regional priorities.

The last comprehensive review of declared plant policies under the NRM Act was completed in 1991 and the current review led by Biosecurity SA should be finalised in 2015.

There are three components to the community engagement process for the current review: to inform the public; to consult on draft plant policies; and to work directly with the public throughout the review process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered. This approach is consistent with the 'inform', 'consult' and 'involve' levels of engagement in the public participation spectrum developed by the International Association for Public Participation – Australasia.

**Declared Plant Review Working Group** Biosecurity Operations Managers from each of the eight NRM regions and policy staff from Biosecurity SA and the Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources are represented on the working group for the review. The members of the working group are tasked with reviewing all draft policies, facilitating weed risk assessments at state and regional levels, coordinating community engagement activities, and preparing formal correspondence for the approvals required by regional NRM boards, the State NRM Council and the Minister for Sustainability, Environment and Conservation.

PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

Community engagement and communications have increased in complexity through the four phases of the review. Phases 1 and 2 address minor changes to declarations and Phases 3 and 4 address more significant changes (see Table 1). Phase 4 includes declared plant policies for feral olives (*Olea europaea* L.), branched broomrape (*Orabanche ramosa* L.) and willows all of which require more extensive engagement with stakeholders than other weeds in the review.

**Developing and implementing a community engagement plan** A community engagement plan was prepared between Phases 2 and 3, when it became clear that the project business plan didn't provide enough detail to guide community engagement processes for the review. Experienced weed managers, policy makers and community engagement professionals were surveyed to help guide the development of the community engagement plan (see Table 2 for the main topics covered in the survey).

The community engagement plan clearly documents the purpose, objectives, stakeholders, engagement parameters, related projects, communication methods, an action plan, and evaluation methods for engaging with land managers, primary producers, the nursery and garden industry and community groups. The plan addresses implementation requirements across eight diverse NRM regions which all have unique populations and community networks. The regions span more than 250,000 square kilometres of Aboriginal lands in the north-west (Alinytjara Wilurara), South Australia's Arid Lands in the north-east covering more than half the state, the Eyre and Yorke Peninsulas, the Flinders Ranges, the mid-North including the Barossa and Clare Valleys, Adelaide, the Mount Lofty Ranges, the Fleurieu Peninsula, scenic Kangaroo Island, the South Australian part of the Murray-Darling Basin, and the state's South East with its rich volcanic soils.

Early engagement with industry organisations and peak bodies representing primary producers and the

nursery and garden industry helped identify critical issues prior to public consultation periods. For example, details were provided to ensure key stakeholders were consulted for the proposed declaration of buffel grass (*Cenchrus ciliaris* L. and *Cenchrus pennisetiformis* Hochst. & Steud.) and registered sterile hybrids for gazanias were identified.

During public consultation periods 'Have Your Say' webpages provided the online interface for accessing draft policies, Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), guiding principles, weed images, summaries for each region and feedback forms. Well-received additions that were used during Phase 3 included FAQs for gardeners, a short 'At a glance' document for all proposed changes and a list of botanical names. Information packs were posted out upon request for people without internet access.

Activities in each region included tailored media releases, newspaper and newsletter articles, radio interviews and presentations at meetings. For remote regions timing was important because the most

**Table 2.** Main topics covered in the survey of experienced weed managers, policy makers and community engagement professionals.

<i>Objectives</i>	Drafting of community engagement objectives
<i>Stakeholders and engagement methods</i>	Identifying stakeholders Most effective methods for seeking input Most difficult stakeholders to engage with and how to involve them Engaging with local government
<i>Resources</i>	Identifying appropriate resources and capacity in each region
<i>Evaluation</i>	How to approach evaluation Drafting of evaluation measures
<i>General</i>	Other advice

**Table 1.** The four phases of the declared plant review.

PHASE 1	PHASE 2	PHASE 3	PHASE 4
<u>46 plants</u> All currently declared	<u>48 plants</u> 35 currently declared 8 new proposals 5 for delisting	<u>50 plants</u> 21 currently declared 24 new proposals 5 for delisting	<u>~12 plants</u> 3 currently declared Approx. 9 new proposals
<i>Public consultation periods</i>			
October to December 2011	October to December 2012	October 2013 to January 2014	Late 2014 to early 2015 (in prep)

widely-read community publications are published every second month.

A mail-out of formal letters was coordinated statewide, which included all councils, neighbouring states and territories and key stakeholders. For Phase 3 paid advertisements were placed in 23 regional papers and *The Stock Journal*. This was the first time that paid advertising was used during the review. Also during Phase 3 multiple media releases were used covering both environmental and agricultural weeds to reach broader audiences.

### **Partnerships with gardening experts in the media**

Gardening experts have enthusiastically supported the review via radio interviews, articles in gardening magazines and by hosting a talkback session. During Phase 3 a short SMS poll asked talkback listeners to send in comments about which plants should be banned from sale. Of the 48 responses, 23 were read out during the talkback show.

### **EVALUATION**

The most successful activities have been: engaging early with key industries and peak bodies; tailoring media releases to particular sectors and/or media opportunities; and partnering with gardening show hosts. The least successful activity has been writing formal letters to stakeholders.

The number of written submissions received has increased with each phase of the review: nine for Phase 1, 24 for Phase 2 and 47 for Phase 3. The quality of the submissions has increased with each phase of the review so far, with more policies being revised after public consultation for Phase 3 than the previous phases. This is in part due to the large number of new plants being proposed for declaration in Phase 3 and the technical information provided in the submissions on the new proposals.

Web statistics were used to measure the use of 'Have Your Say' webpages during the public consultation periods for phases 2 and 3. For Phase 2, 500 unique visitors accessed the public consultation 'Have Your Say' webpages spending an average of four minutes and 45 seconds viewing the site. For Phase 3, 630 unique visitors accessed the public consultation webpages spending an average of six minutes and 30 seconds viewing the site.

Meeting with key stakeholders between the public consultation periods has been beneficial in maintaining effective working relationships and involvement over the years of the review. Informal feedback from these meetings has reinforced what stakeholders have liked about the process (e.g. structured feedback forms, good quality images on webpages, adequate

lead time to prepare for changes in declarations) and what they haven't liked about the process (e.g. lack of lists of botanical names and lack of user-friendly identification resources for plants being proposed for declaration).

### **DISCUSSION**

It has been challenging to ensure that stakeholders are given the opportunity to engage in the review and to publicise each public consultation period. Significant resources are required to guide stakeholders into providing meaningful input that can be used to revise draft policies.

Some stakeholders have been very effective at highlighting inconsistencies across regional boundaries and encouraging an NRM Board to seek additional actions and outcomes in line with a neighbouring region. Stakeholders with taxonomic and technical expertise have influenced the scope of some policies by suggesting the addition of closely related species with similar impacts and invasiveness. Plant breeders and retailers have provided technical information to help determine which plant varieties are to be included and excluded from declared plant policies, including advice on evidence and the use of new technologies in plant genetics.

One of the positive off-shoots from the review has been the expert and anecdotal information provided for plants that should be considered for weed risk assessment at both state and regional levels. Emerging weed problems have been reported and effective working relationships built due to the increased effort in community engagement.

Nevertheless, the challenges of juggling community expectations and opposing views at local and regional levels do take considerable time to work through. To find appropriate solutions for regulating weed management the experience of the working group members has been instrumental in delivering each phase of the review. The regional Biosecurity Operations Managers have been able to make technical decisions with confidence and to draw on their very sound knowledge of community values and concerns. Information sharing and collaboration across regional and state levels has been successful in delivering the high standard of policies required.

Informally the authors have observed increasing community confidence in the process for declaring plants, particularly as new environmental weeds have been proposed for declaration. Evaluation at the completion of the review will help document stakeholder views on the process, responsible governance, building ownership and promoting voluntary compliance.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors acknowledge the landholders, community leaders, industry organisations, volunteers, NRM board members, researchers and media professionals who have enthusiastically participated in the declared plant review.

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