

Before the bulldozers go in: reducing the risk of new and emerging weeds in Leigh Creek

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Summary At its peak, the mining town of Leigh Creek had a population of over 2,500. Following the closure of the Coal Mine in 2016 a plan was released in December 2021 to significantly reduce the footprint of the town to accommodate approximately 150 residents who remain. This will involve the removal of a large number of houses and fences. The majority of houses in Leigh Creek were vacated in 2016 and with much of the town earmarked for demolition, there is a risk that remaining garden plants could persist and escape into the landscape becoming weeds. Water was provided free of charge to residents which led to some extensive and elaborate gardens, home to a number of exotic plant species. Surveillance of surviving garden plants at Leigh Creek commenced in September 2019, with further surveys in October 2020 and June 2021. These were undertaken with Shannon Robertson (Facilitator newly established weeds, PIRSA) and Chris Brodie (Weeds Botanist, State Herbarium of South Australia). Surveys were conducted via inspections of abandoned yards in the

township, roadsides, drainage lines and tourism sites around the town. Community engagement achieved through workshops, property visits and an open invite for community members to join the surveys created a local surveillance network. This resulted in community members bringing unknown plant species to our attention resulting in the detection of previously unknown weed populations or potential weeds. The surveys and community engagement resulted in a number of significant weed and potential weed species discoveries, including the first naturalised record for Australia of *Tephrocactus articulatus* (Pine Cone Cactus). Detection of plants provided the opportunity for their control early on in the invasion curve. Pine Cone Cactus and other discoveries have since been controlled and a long-term monitoring plan has been developed to re-visit high risk sites into the future.

Keywords New and emerging weeds, community engagement, Leigh Creek, surveillance, garden plant