

WEED CONTROL BOARDS - DO WE NEED NON-SCIENTISTS?

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Summary. This paper gives a farmers's view of the role of non-scientists on weed control authorities. Control authorities generally comprise both scientists and non-scientists such as farmers and environmentalists.

The non-scientist board members are very necessary to project any ideas or conclusions the board makes, to the people who actually do the work.

A non-scientist board member with some tertiary education, a broad outlook, and successful in their field is ideal. You should pick, rather than elect, an individual who has worthwhile knowledge of the subject, and can communicate back to his peers. Boards should be limited to six or seven members and include a good, non-public servant chair.

INTRODUCTION

This is going to be the most non-scientific paper ever presented to a conference of this nature. It might just give you all a little light relief!

I can imagine many occasions at a meeting of a statutory weeds board where a scientist has to listen to a non-scientist talk on a problem. He may either be a farmer or may be an environmentalist. I can picture the scientist thinking to himself: "Why doesn't this nitwit shut up, he doesn't understand the subject, he is being parochial with tunnel vision, he wanders all over the place, and he is dull". One of the most difficult things for a farmer is not to relate a problem to his own situation or environment.

So why not have just scientists on boards and committees dealing with pest plants? Could they operate more efficiently and with less cost?

Prior to 1948 weed control in South Australia was overseen by Ministerial advisory committees made up of public servants. In 1948 a new Noxious Weeds Advisory Committee was appointed with two non-scientists representing local government and farmers (6).

Landowners continue to have a role in noxious weed control authorities in SA (3), Qld (7), WA (1), and in advisory committees for most other states. These boards are successful at meeting farmers needs (5).

In SA we have a two-tiered system with local animal and plant control boards whose members are appointed by local government. The Animal and Plant Control Commission is responsible on a statewide basis. It comprises seven members, six nominated by the Minister of Primary Industries, and one, being a public servant nominated by the Minister for Environment and Land Management. The Minister of Primary Industries must select at least four primary producers, and two persons from a panel of no less than four nominated by the Local Government Association with appropriate experience in agriculture and matters of animal and plant control (2).

ROLE OF NON-SCIENTISTS

So why not have just scientists on boards and committees dealing with pest plants? Could they operate them more efficiently and with less cost?

The first answer is yes, they probably could.

The next answer lies in where the weeds actually occur, which is usually either on farms, crown lands or National Parks and reserves. These lands belong to farmers or the State. In the end the landholder has to deal with the problem of weeds, and is responsible for their control and eradication (2). So therefore landholders should have some say in these boards.

These representative landowners are very necessary to project any ideas or conclusions the board makes, to the people who have actually to do the work (8). A structure which gives strong local participation and responsibility is essential for effective weed legislation (9).

SELECTION OF BOARD MEMBERS

So how do we ensure that the best possible selection is made of the person to fill this role?

I have been a farmer for most of my life, and a member of the South Australian Vertebrate Pest Control Authority and Pest Plants Commission, probably for longer than anyone else, and maybe for too long! So I have some experience of a great variety of board members.

The ideal member in my view is an educated person, preferably with a tertiary education, so that he or she has been taught to think. This person should have travelled a bit, which tends to give them a broader outlook. It is also necessary that they have been successful in what they are doing, as this gives them standing and respect in the community. They must be able to visualise problems in a wider sense than their own area. One of the things I am sick of hearing is: "Now at Oodnawallop where I live, we always do things in this way, (and he will go on to describe this at length), and I cannot see why you cannot fix the problem at Oodnawant".

People on a board must not be there just because they represent another organisation. I well remember an experience on the executive of a primary producers' organisation in South Australia, when we were asked to appoint a member to the State Abattoirs board. The discussion went something like this:-

"Well, Richard Harvey has sheep and cattle which he sends to this abattoir, and it is his turn for another Board".

Although I eventually learnt a lot, my knowledge of running an abattoir initially was almost zero.

So you need to resist this sort of pressure, which is not always easy for a Minister of State. Instead pick an individual who has the attributes I have already mentioned, plus a worthwhile knowledge of the subject, and who can communicate with his peers.

THE CHAIR

Another concern is the selection of a board presiding officer or chair. I would prefer to see an independent chairman of a weeds authority, rather than a public servant. This is not because I dislike public servants, but usually they are combining the job with a very heavy workload from other directions, and cannot devote sufficient time to the weeds board.

The success of any meeting is largely determined by the presiding officer (4). There are many people who seem quite normal individuals at a meeting, but on being elected to the chair their whole personality changes. Because nobody can really interrupt them they talk too much, prolong the meeting, and tend to shorten the members lives through boredom. A good chairman should stop people talking, not do it himself.

BOARD SIZE

Six or seven members on a board is plenty. Resist the temptation to add people either because they want representation, or to increase the coverage geographically (4). A board of fourteen or fifteen is recommended by some (10) but in my experience is far too many, cumbersome, and difficult to handle.

I became chairman of a board like this some years ago, and the only way I could handle it to make the meetings reasonably short was to arrange to have most of the business decided beforehand, which is not a good idea.

Finally, life is very much more pleasant if every member has a sense of humour!

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