

Agricultural contractors bail up weeds – an accreditation system to reduce weed spread in Tasmania

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Summary The inadvertent spread of weeds by vehicles, machinery and equipment has numerous unwanted consequences and is one of the most common and seemingly intractable weed management challenges. Tasmanian agricultural contractors are addressing the issue through a simple but innovative accreditation system for weed hygiene. The system involves a three-part code of practice and compliance assessment. Initial progress indicates that the initiative has sound potential to reduce the spread of agricultural weeds in Tasmania. An additional, significant benefit is enhancement of the State's weed surveillance and early detection capacity. Ongoing dedication to this initiative on the part of the association representing Tasmania's agricultural contractors indicates its future prospects are relatively secure.

Keywords Agricultural Contractors of Tasmania Incorporated, weed hygiene, weed identification, code of practice, accreditation, compliance audit, clean down procedures.

INTRODUCTION

Agricultural Contractors of Tasmania Inc. (ACTI) is an important, progressive element in the State's rural sector. It has a long, proud history with origins that trace back to the Steam Thresher Men's Association of the 19th Century. Today ACTI represents over 120 members who engage in a variety of farm work including harvesting, cultivation, sowing, spraying and other more specialised agricultural operations.

In early 2003 the ACTI Executive Committee began to investigate the value and practicality of establishing a weed hygiene accreditation system for its members. The main impetus for this was a growing perception of increasingly stringent demands from the market in terms of product and service quality as these relate to weed contamination and spread. Weed contamination compromises the value of agricultural products and increases the risk of product rejection. The value of agricultural land may be reduced if weeds are spread from one property to another. In addition, Tasmania's new weed laws mean that any person found to be spreading declared weeds in the course of their activities may be legally required to undertake corrective action or risk a fine or prosecution under the *Weed*

Management Act 1999. Ultimately the viability of any agricultural contracting business is reduced if a reputation for poor weed hygiene is allowed to develop.

The ACTI Executive decided that members needed a way of ensuring their role in agricultural production in respect of weed hygiene is carried out to a high standard and documented as such. Apart from weed spread mitigation, the greatest advantage of this is that it provides a level of protection to contractors – weed contamination and spread is far less likely to be blamed upon poor contractor weed hygiene practices if, for each job, satisfactory standards are met and appropriate records are kept. The executive determined that an accreditation system would provide the best means of achieving this objective. It envisaged clear standards for contractors to work to and a fair and straightforward means of auditing or checking that contractors understand and adhere consistently to these standards. The executive was further encouraged by other anticipated benefits of accreditation. For example it would provide guidance to new agricultural contractors and allow those with greater experience to demonstrate their professionalism. Accreditation would contribute to risk minimisation and inspire greater confidence across the market in the supply of contractor services and agricultural products. It would also provide a framework against which individual clients and contractors could negotiate reasonable and effective actions for minimising weed contamination and spread.

Perhaps the most important observations about the conception of this initiative relate to the strong element of self-motivation demonstrated by ACTI and its willingness from the outset to drive and take responsibility for outcomes. In addition to describing the development, form and implementation of this accreditation system, this paper argues that weed hygiene initiatives are far more likely to be successful if prime carriage is accepted fully by the organisations for which they are designed, with government agencies playing supporting roles only.

SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT

In March 2003 ACTI Executive members, all of whom are volunteers, approached the Department of Primary Industries, Water and Environment (DPIWE),

Tasmania for assistance with progressing their idea for weed hygiene accreditation. The DPIWE was more than happy to contribute due to obvious synergies between the ACTI proposal and its own programs and policies for weed hygiene and declared weed control. The development process proceeded as follows.

Research and design Initial discussion revealed that the Executive, whilst having a general notion about what it wanted to achieve, was less certain about system content and how to proceed. The DPIWE assisted by researching existing weed hygiene initiatives including the Environmentally Aware Contractors Program developed in Victoria (Dupe undated); other agricultural codes of practice or weed hygiene guidelines used in Tasmania (DPIWE 1999, Rudman 2004) and Queensland guidelines for limiting weed seed spread (DNR 2000). The DPIWE also investigated approaches to accreditation and consulted people familiar with quality assurance systems for rural industries. A broad list of considerations concerning accreditation system components and options was assembled. This formed the basis of subsequent discussions during which the Executive determined the design specifications for the accreditation system. These (not in priority order) are:

- minimal paperwork for members;
- high credibility and value in the marketplace;
- low implementation and maintenance costs to members and ACTI;
- a single level of accreditation;
- eligibility for accreditation confined to ACTI members;
- accreditation standards to be highly practicable and to reflect current best practice as determined by ACTI;
- accreditation standards to be clearly and simply specified within a code of practice;
- compliance with standards to be checked by external audit;
- alignment with DPIWE protocols or advice concerning weed surveillance, identification and management;
- alignment with the requirements of the Tasmanian *Weed Management Act 1999*; and
- administration, promotion, monitoring and evaluation of the system to be undertaken and controlled by the ACTI Executive.

Linkages and alignment to formal accreditation structures (e.g. National Conservation and Land Management course weed management competencies) were considered by the Executive but deemed not essential at this stage.

Component development Using the design specifications, ACTI and the DPIWE drafted the three main components of the accreditation system.

1. **The code of practice.** This specifies the weed hygiene standards against which accreditation is determined. It has three parts: weed identification skills and weed management knowledge; selection and preparation of sites at which to conduct clean down procedures; and hygiene procedures specific to particular categories of vehicle, equipment and implements used by agricultural contractors. Requirements for the first part of the code of practice specify attendance at a weed identification and management workshop and that the contractor obtain suitable weed identification reference material. Requirements for the second and third parts of the code are simply that contractors follow the protocols for clean-down site selection and cleaning down as described in the code as closely as possible.
2. **The job sheet.** Contractors are to use this to record weed information relevant to each job. If completed properly the job sheet provides a concise description of clean down procedures undertaken, weeds encountered and any relevant management actions undertaken or negotiated with the client. The job sheet also has provision for sign-off by both contractor and client to indicate agreement on the nature of existing weed problems and mutual satisfaction with weed management or hygiene procedures. On indicating an intention to participate in the accreditation system, the contractor is supplied with a booklet of job sheets. Carbon duplicates are provided to clients.
3. **The compliance agreement.** This is an instrument for recording audit results and formalising accreditation. A two-stage audit is proposed. The Initial Audit involves verifying that the contractor understands and satisfies the requirements of the code of practice. For example, job sheet booklets will be examined to see that weed information is being recorded adequately and consistently for each job, attendance at weed identification and management workshops will be checked and knowledge of clean down procedures relevant to the contractor will need to be verbally demonstrated. If the contractor passes the Initial Audit a biennial site audit occurs thereafter to ensure accreditation requirements continue to be met. Quarantine Tasmania has agreed to conduct the compliance audits for this initiative and provide results and recommendations to the ACTI Executive. The Executive is responsible for arranging audit schedules and for issuing, denying or revoking accreditation based on audit results.

Membership consultation Once the draft components were completed the Executive arranged discussion with members of each of the three regional ACTI sub-branches. Executive members and DPIWE staff made joint presentations at meetings, explaining the proposed system and facilitating frank discussion. Members generally voiced support however some expressed concerns about extra paper work, potentially excessive time demands of clean down procedures and questioned the proposal's rationale, in particular the nature of anticipated benefits to individuals and the sector in general. Members also expressed some hesitancy and concern about the compliance audit and sought assurance about the credentials of the auditors, especially in terms of knowledge of the contractors' operating environment, equipment and machinery. Despite these opinions and concerns, the over-riding view of members was supportive and they agreed to trial the system as presented.

RESULTS

Its recent inception notwithstanding, a number of indicators suggest that the ACTI weed hygiene accreditation system will be a valuable component for weed spread prevention in Tasmania, although it does appear that some fine tuning is warranted.

Sixty contractors, approximately half the ACTI membership, have undertaken the weed workshop in the first year. Feedback was positive with most workshop participants reporting satisfaction with its scope, pitch and learning outcomes. The workshop format included presentations by DPIWE staff about weed identification and Tasmania's weed laws followed by group work focusing on resolution of weed management scenarios likely to be encountered by contractors.

Workshop participants were also given an opportunity to purchase the TOPCROP program's 'Weeds: The Ute Guide' (Cummins and Moerkkerk 1999). The ACTI Executive decided that this publication provided the best available identification resource in terms of range of relevant weeds described therein, quality of images, simplicity of text and general ease of use. Feedback from members thus far suggests that the guides are being used regularly.

In addition, about twenty-five members have indicated a readiness to undergo an audit and have been completing job sheets in preparation. Once several contractors have progressed through the initial audit and reported the experience to their colleagues this number is expected to increase as lingering concerns and reticence about what it involves are dispelled.

A further benefit of the initiative is increased weed reporting to the DPIWE by ACTI members. This

indicates the strengthening of cooperative relations and enhanced weed surveillance capacity in Tasmania. For example, over the 2003/2004 season ACTI members reported infestations of *amsinckia*, *Amsinckia* spp., St. John's wort, *Hypericum perforatum* L. and Pater-son's curse, *Echium plantagineum* L., all of which are relatively uncommon but serious or potentially serious weeds of Tasmanian agriculture. In addition, many contractors reported common weeds that were unknown to them and not described in their Ute Guides, demonstrating that they are actively improving their weed identification skills and willing to take time to seek advice.

The ACTI Executive is also exploring possibilities for business and commercial advantages for accredited members. Tasmania Feedlot Pty Ltd., for example, demands that all its feed grain and fodder inputs meet stringent quality requirements, including absence of contaminating seed. This particular business already demonstrates a willingness to offer price premiums for best practice that ensures its standards are met. For example, GrainCare program participants who supply the feedlot have received price premiums. The ACTI Executive envisages that clients who use accredited contractors may also be able to negotiate a small price premium. This in turn could lead to preferential use of accredited contractors by growers supplying the feedlot.

Feedback from participating members so far has also highlighted areas that require adjustment or rethinking. For example, obtaining job sheet sign-off by clients is proving problematic because clients are not necessarily present when the job occurs. Obtaining sign-off subsequently can represent an inconvenience most contractors are not willing to bear. Additionally, apart from several newspaper articles around the time the initiative was launched, it has not been heavily promoted which means many clients are largely unaware of its purpose and potential benefits. The ACTI Executive is currently investigating opportunities for raising the profile of its accreditation system.

DISCUSSION

This initiative is a fine example of a grass roots agricultural organisation taking its own weed management issues firmly in hand. Whilst ongoing State agency technical support is clearly vital to the longer term prospects of the accreditation system, its future success as a means of minimising weed spread is perhaps most closely aligned to the ability and commitment of the ACTI Executive to maintain ownership. Executive efforts to date indicate an impressive capacity for administering and promoting the initiative and a real commitment to encouraging member participation.

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