

Nationally coordinated weed management: it's working at the local level

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Summary This paper demonstrates that a nationally coordinated approach to Australia's worst weeds can be effective, efficient and enduring, using the Weeds of National Significance program as an example. This approach uses education, extension and decision support tools as drivers that engage weed managers to help them provide long-lasting innovative change to reduce the impact of weeds.

A nationally coordinated and strategic approach with an engaged community fosters ownership, innovation and allows for enormous value to be added to any government financial commitment.

It must be recognised, however, that a reduction in weeds on the ground occurs not because of government programs but because of work done at the local level, by farmers, land managers, Landcare groups and others. Government leadership and investment in nationally coordinated weed management can derive a large return on investment, at the economic, environmental and social level. This paper discusses how national weed coordination can deliver benefits at both the local and national level. It will also demonstrate the huge leveraging of external funding, and in-kind support, that can be demonstrated if leadership and community involvement are the main drivers.

Keywords Community, Landcare, Weeds of National Significance, coordinated weed management, farmers, Tamar NRM, WoNS.

INTRODUCTION

The perennial question of who is responsible for weed management is a never ending argument, with most layers of Government attempting to divert responsibility to another entity. To overcome this vacuum, the Australian Government over the last 10 years has delivered a range of programmes, processes and structures aimed at fostering nationally coordinated management, with varying degrees of success.

One such initiative is the Weeds of National Significance (WoNS) program, which has prompted a gradual move from direct funding for local initiatives to a more strategic and nationally coordinated approach to weed management. This paper provides examples of local successes facilitated by national leadership through the WoNS initiative, and makes a case for continued leadership in strategic weed

management from the community and from governments at all levels.

Current issues What has been consistent over the last 10 years in weed management is inconsistency; this is apparent in the vast number of structures, processes, and projects that have been trialled over this time. What is desperately needed is leadership, and an integrated approach that involves the community and industry through adoption, planning, implementation and evaluation to win the war against weeds.

Because of the historical start stop approach, we now have a large proportion of the community disengaged or disillusioned, with many leaving the field and taking their corporate knowledge with them. We know the cost of re-engaging people and building trust is a high one and does not happen overnight. Thus there is considerable value in supporting strategic coordinated efforts over the long term, as opposed to providing a few years of funding and then starting a new program that requires re-engagement.

Another area of concern is the lack of understanding or recognition for the land manager contributions and the massive community efforts through Landcare, Coastcare, and the community groups of many descriptions who are waging a war on weeds that Governments could not buy for love nor money.

What Governments and community nearly always forget is that it is the land managers, who manage over 70% of the landscape, who also bear the financial burden of weeds. Part of these costs are then transferred to the community through an increase in the cost of goods, increased taxes, and a decrease in public and private amenity, to name a few.

We also have a culture in parts of our community and indeed some state governments where there is a mendicant attitude of either cost shifting or not taking action unless there is cash or in-kind payment; this thinking has to stop. Even if we were not in financially constrained times, governments would not be able to afford to control all weeds, nor should they; ultimately weed control is the land manager's responsibility.

To do nothing is not an option, as the cost would be too high in lost production, lost aesthetics and damage to biodiversity. It is clear there needs to be substantial change: We need engagement and leadership. This

should come from government and industry, and needs to involve all stakeholders. There needs to be a two-way conversation, a new inclusive structure and governments need to look at the big picture.

As in business, governments do not generate wealth; that is the role of business. It is the same with weeds. Governments do not get rid of weeds; that is the role of land managers. However it is governments' role to make an operating environment that is conducive to business, and similarly, to create structures and programs that allow effective, efficient weed management.

DISCUSSION

On 1 June 1999 the Weeds of National Significance initiative was launched with the inaugural list of 20 weeds announced. These 20 weeds were then brought under national coordination with the aim of reducing the impacts, restricting the spread and/or eradicating these weeds from parts of Australia. Each weed had a strategic plan and management committee or task force made up of an independent chair and members who were both skilled and sectorial based. Implementation of the strategic plans, with guidance from the task forces, was outcome focused and achieved enormous successes from national to local levels. For example, the Gorse (*Ulex europaeus* L.) Taskforce was able to foster local, regional and state actions such as:

- Establish twenty 25 year Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) for targeted gorse eradication in five states.
- Establish the Gorse Baton Programme that allows local residents to 'risk manage' the 25 year agreements and ensure action.
- Cooperate with land managers across Western Australia, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and New South Wales to secure 220,000 square kilometres under MoUs to maintain the areas gorse free.
- Undertake targeted control to achieve significant measurable reduction in key outlying infestations of gorse.
- Research, develop and produce the National Gorse Best Practice Manual (10,000 copies with 9,000 in circulation).
- Produce and launch a television 'Weedmercial' to raise awareness of gorse.
- Increase in the awareness of weeds generally, with a focus on economic and environmental impacts.
- Establish a gorse management achiever recognition, where we formally recognised those in the community who had been leading by example.
- Produce a legacy document that outlined our successes and failures, a 'warts and all' document,

which was made available for others to learn from.

Interestingly 90% of the on ground action was done without any additional funding, but rather by working with land managers to reprioritise actions to achieve more strategic outcomes. As with the other WoNS taskforces, the aim was to be strategic, use best practice and create an environment so people will take on responsibility after the initial education, extension and tools have been delivered.

There are multiple examples of other such successes from the ten-plus years of national WoNS coordination (Cherry *et al.* 2012). However it is sometimes the outputs and measurable value adding that are not considered when assessing success. While it is difficult to measure exactly, statistics from 2003 to 2009 show that WoNS awareness raising activities, such as workshops, training, and presentations reached 16,688 people. In addition, over 525,000 extension materials and weed management resources were delivered across Australia.

Perhaps the best example of the value of investment in national coordination is the comparison of Australian Government versus all other stakeholder investment for this same six year period. The Australian Government invested approximately \$6.1 million in supporting national WoNS coordination. This was matched by a co-investment of over \$116 million from all other stakeholder sources (including local, regional and community effort). This latter figure is conservative, as it was measured over a shorter time frame than the whole program and did not include expenditure on all the WoNS weeds. In anyone's language, this is huge leveraging power and an enormous return on investment.

These examples are at the national level; however it is important to understand how this translates at the local level. There is a range of evidence to support the concept that national leadership and coordination translates to significant outcomes at the local level. All around Australia farmers, Landcare and other groups are dealing with weeds at the local level, and in many cases, national coordination has been the catalyst for local action.

In this instance I will use Tamar Natural Resource Management (Tamar NRM), who are situated in northern Tasmania and supported by the three local councils of Launceston City, George Town and West Tamar, and the community. This dynamic award winning group is a perfect example of how national coordination works at the local level and value adds the national effort. It needs to be recognised that this type of engagement at the local level is not unusual and is mirrored across Australia.

Over the last ten years Tamar NRM, in conjunction with farmers, Landcare and the general community, have organised strategic weed activities based on both WoNS and local weeds, in which the learnings from the WoNS program have applied to successfully manage local weeds. Examples include:

- Boneseed (*Chrysanthemoides monilifera* (L.) Norl. subsp. *monilifera*): The ‘Boneseed Blitz’, which takes place each September. Tamar NRM assists community groups to hold up to 20 activities across the region, with the aim of eradicating boneseed from the community. So successful were the activities over the last eight years, that there is now an eradication plan in place that is being implemented by the three local government areas.
- Serrated Tussock (*Nassella trichotoma* (Nees) Hack.): The Tamar Valley has been declared a serrated tussock weed-free zone due to concerted and coordinated efforts. This is backed up with education, awareness, early detection and sustained eradication activities.
- Crack willow (*Salix fragilis* L.): A best practice demonstration site has been developed in an area of Pipers River that provides the community with exemplary guidance on how to eradicate crack willow and rehabilitate the river.
- Bridal creeper (*Asparagus asparagoides* (L.) Druce): The Tamar community are determined to eradicate this weed, using best practice techniques, education, awareness, and decision support tools. A strategic plan is being implemented across the region.
- Blackberry (*Rubus fruticosus* L.): Coastal communities like Weymouth now have the tools and best practice techniques to eradicate blackberry from their community, and they are doing it!

There are a range of other weeds now being successfully managed using learnings from the WoNS program. Importantly, all these activities are done with little or no money from government funding sources: most of the funding is private.

Local level action in this instance would not be possible if it were not for Tamar NRM, Launceston City, George Town and West Tamar Councils, Department of Primary Industries and Water, Parks and Wildlife Service and most importantly, farmers and

the community working together. This local action happens because of the leadership shown at the local level, but also because of the trust that is generated by having a national program such as WoNS that supports local and regional groups to implement strategic weed control.

Some things need national coordination and leadership; precedents are plenty. Examples exist in health, taxation, education, water reform and salinity. We have past programs to learn from, and it is clear that a well-designed program can value add to government investment, as well as achieve on-ground outcomes such as weed control. But a new, re-designed program needs to happen now to ensure momentum continues. This will require a change in thinking in government departments, and a defining leadership role by government, industry, and community at both the national and local level.

It is clear there needs to be a refinement on how we implement cost-effective weed management, including how we strategically plan, how we deliver on ground works, how we integrate science and research, how we monitor and evaluate, and most importantly, how we include industry and the community in the whole process. Leadership, trust and community involvement are the main drivers for on ground action at a local scale. But that must be supported by a robust national framework; it is the role of governments to make that happen. To say it is too costly is not a valid argument, as the evidence to date show that return on strategic investment far outweighs the initial costs.

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