

What are the benefits of using a devolved grant model to manage weeds in Tasmania?

Peter Stronach

Landcare Tasmania Inc., PO Box 21 South Hobart, Tasmania 7004, Australia
(projectmanager@landcaretas.org.au)

Summary Landcare Tasmania is an experienced facilitator of on-ground weed control activities that uses a devolved grant model. This paper provides details of the grant process that delivers funding to landholders managing weeds across Tasmania.

Landcare Tasmania secured three years of funding from the Australian Government's Clean Energy Futures Biodiversity Fund. The three year fund from 2012–2015 allows for a longer-term strategic approach than most other grant schemes.

A staged funding process that allows for primary and seasonal follow-up weed control, plus the provision of support staff, has achieved excellent results in weed management. The devolved grant structure adopted and refined by Landcare Tasmania increases the effectiveness of funds delivered for landscape-scale weed management. It remains open to innovation and complementary methods, limits risk and maintains rigour and technical integrity using a proven, strategic and regional approach that is achieving measurable improvements to biodiversity values.

This paper highlights five key aspects of the devolved grant model: program development; application process; assessment criteria; project tracking; and extension support. The paper discusses how these have contributed to more effective targeting, monitoring, and evaluation of funding activities.

Keywords Landcare, Tasmania, weed management, devolved grants.

INTRODUCTION

Landcare Tasmania is delivering devolved grants with funding provided by the Australian Government's Biodiversity Fund. One of the three key themes of the Fund addressed through these grants is managing threats to biodiversity. The majority of successful grant recipients (or proponents) addressing this theme include weed managers and of the 57 successful projects, 48 include weed control activities. The grants support activities that are removing threats across over 4100 ha of high conservation vegetation. The Landcare Biodiversity Grants (LBG) began in June 2012 and will conclude in July 2015.

Partnering with the Tasmanian State Governments Private Land and Conservation Program (PLCP), and

utilising our broad network across the state, Landcare Tasmania has demonstrated an ability to attract high quality projects. Landcare Tasmania's long history of supporting care groups and landholders by building capacity to undertake on-ground weed control activities has helped enhance biodiversity and production values across Tasmania. Landcare Tasmania's devolved grant process was developed to improve the efficacy of monitoring and evaluation of expenditure, and is underpinned by the up-skilling of project proponents to enable long-term, sustainable weed management.

A step-by-step application and project monitoring framework, which is informed by internal review and assessment, makes the process adaptable and corrective. At property scale, weed management is not necessarily straightforward. Planning is crucial and may involve a number of different steps to ensure that successful and cost-efficient control measures are employed. Capacity building is crucial, as it fosters project ownership and commitment. The longer project duration allows critical multi-seasonal follow-up activities to be undertaken on weeds such as Spanish heath (*Erica lusitânica* Rudolphi) and gorse (*Ulex europaeus* L.), which is typically outside the scope of short-term grants.

ASPECTS OF THE DEVOLVED GRANTS PROCESS

Our devolved grants system has several facets that ensure projects are delivered on time and are to a high quality standard. The system also responds to the needs of on-ground land managers and the requirements of the funding body to implement landscape-scale change.

Program development The LBG sought projects with high conservation value through two separate approaches: a targeted closed round and a state-wide open round. The targeted round was offered to recognised landholders with projects that matched the themes for activities in high conservation vegetation. For example, projects recognised by the PLCP as important to the national reserve system (Carter *et al.* 2010) became focal areas in Round 1. Round 2 was

open to all land managers and Round 3 was used to accommodate projects from Round 2 that required further development or projects that were not impacted by a later start date. Landcare Tasmania and the PLCP's communication networks ensured interest from a broad audience, resulting in 98 expressions of interest for the open round: 63 of these were asked to submit a full application.

Application process The simple but informative Expression of Interest (EOI) form (a one page document) allowed project staff to ascertain the suitability of each project proposal. Site visits by project staff helped develop a good understanding of the land management issues and aided the facilitation of proper planning for each project. From the applicant's position, a straightforward application layout ensured that a step-by-step account of proposed activities are formulated and costed. This information formed the basis for a works plan that outlines the project description, management activities, methodologies and site maintenance activities. The works plan enables the project to be followed and monitored by project support staff and the individual or group doing the work. In addition, the works plan is increasingly important when weed management techniques vary depending on environmental parameters and stage of control (Gouldthorpe 2006).

Project development involves the collaboration of a number of third parties. Following a quote/tender process during the application period, weed contractors are employed directly by the proponent to undertake on-ground works. To ensure standards are maintained, each project is required to complete a contractor log and map areas of works (where applicable). A key assessment criterion is capacity to deliver ongoing project maintenance. Successful applicants need to assure the Technical Assessment Committee of their long-term project commitment. Ten-year management agreements signed by the proponents solidify their obligations to the contract. The high level of technical support provided to funding recipients equips them with the skills and knowledge to manage their projects into the future.

Assessment criteria A rigorous but efficient assessment of selection criteria is part of the review process for project proposals. Essential administrative and eligibility requirements are important starting points (e.g., land ownership, cultural heritage approvals, appropriate insurance). The technical assessment committee then rank and make recommendations for projects based on the following criteria: 1) technically sound; 2) best practice methodologies; 3) capacity and

commitment to deliver; 4) conservation value; and 5) value for money.

Technical assessment committee members first assess projects individually, followed by a group meeting during which the projects are assessed and priority ranked. The ranked projects are then considered by the steering committee made up of project partners and stakeholders, whose role is to provide broader strategic direction and align overall deliverables to project contracts.

Both the technical assessment committee and the steering committee play a role in aligning the projects with national and regional strategies, such as the Weeds of National Significance (WoNS) plans, Tasmania's Weed Management Strategy, regional weed strategies, conservation action plans and local site plans. Key to the process is the technical assessment committee that draws from a qualified professional network with relevant experience in invasive species, conservation and restoration management.

Project tracking Monitoring and evaluation are a fundamental part of the project management team's activities. With 57 projects currently undertaking on-ground activities, the use of a grant management database system is essential for tracking the progress of financial and activity-based events. Cross checking proposed activities with timing and expenditure of funds is also done using progress reports, site visits, ongoing staff contact and contractor logs, effectively ensuring project compliance.

Data collection, including weed mapping, photo points, and recording of methods and success rates, has allowed for a better understanding of each project and how it fits to landscape-scale weed management. The WoNS national weed mapping standards are used for recording the results of weed management activities, and WoNS data is provided to the Tasmanian Natural Values Atlas database. A rapid assessment method (developed by Natural Resource Planning Pty Ltd) is used to identify site condition, measure the impact of removing threats, and provide for monitoring of change over time. The tool is an adaption of the Forest Conservation Fund Naturalness Index (Eigernaam et al, 2007) and Vegetation Condition Benchmarks in Tasmania (Michaels 2006).

Extension support Landcare Tasmania utilises two on-ground staff members and the support of three on-ground staff members from PLCP to liaise, collaborate and engage with landholders and groups that are participating in project activities. Grant proponents are therefore connected to relevant experts and information, which builds capacity for on-going

management and maintenance of projects. A realistic in-kind contribution by staff (Landcare Tasmania and PLCP), care groups and landholders is attained through these relationships. This is evidenced by:

- early surfacing of immediate or potential issues,
- implementation of best practice management,
- strong partnership development, particularly where multi-stakeholder engagement is involved,
- recognition of local land management knowledge and practices,
- increased capacity of landholders who may otherwise not have the technical, physical or financial capacity to undertake on-ground actions,
- landholder/manager exposure to and connectivity with local experts and on-ground specialist weed contractors, and
- risk control and improved data collection through site inspection and on-going liaison with proponents.

DISCUSSION

With its large community and professional networks, Landcare Tasmania is able to effectively harness the Landcare movement's momentum and provide effective funding incentives. By motivating potential applicants to develop and deliver technically sound projects, Landcare Tasmania is able to mobilise on-ground activities that provide long-term benefits to landscape-scale change.

Efficiency From application to implementation, several opportunities were identified that have increased the efficiency of the devolved grants process. Analysis of previous Landcare Tasmania devolved grants revealed that the funding rounds were heavily over-subscribed, likely due to land manager needs outstripping funding availability. Consequently the Expression of Interest (EOI) was introduced into the LBG. The EOI process screens all proposals for the best fit without burdening applicants with requirements for the high level of detail required in full proposals. Project staff were then able to focus on facilitating project submissions that best matched program goals. In some cases, staff were able to direct unsuitable EOIs to other possible funding sources.

Effective and adaptive delivery Linking expenditure to outcomes is a key way of ensuring value is achieved and recorded for projects (Hajkowicz 2009). Funding programs may experience poor reporting of value for money (Yee and Rolfe 2006) and it has been the aim of Landcare Tasmania to develop, strengthen and improve its devolved grants process to ensure better accountability. Improvements implemented under

the LBG were outlined previously in this paper. These methods ensure Landcare Tasmania is able to deliver strategic and measured outcomes while nurturing its relationship with land managers and care groups to foster the Landcare ethic. The flexibility of the devolved grants process will allow Landcare Tasmania to respond to land management issues with increased capacity to deliver landscape- focussed regional, state and national programs.

Risk management Landcare Tasmania's devolved grants model attempts to minimise risk across the various components of the grant delivery process. From a rigorous assessment process of individual projects to the overall tracking and governance of contract deliverables, reducing risk is essential when managing strategic investments, both in terms of the contractual obligations to the funding body and to reducing the impacts of unforeseen events (both environmental and social) affecting the delivery of on-ground actions. Allocating funding in stages has enabled timeframes to be set for projects and enabled the incorporation of periodic progress reporting requirements. The progress reporting assists project staff to identify and respond to potential delivery difficulties by reallocating or modifying project design and/or activity timeframes.

The staged funding process has also allowed for primary and essential seasonal follow-up control to be conducted over the life of a project. At the completion of a funding stage, progress reports are checked and further funding is released on receipt of a report confirming the completion of each stage. Flexible staging timelines allows for project adjustments (e.g., treatment timing may be altered based on seasonal variation, which minimises pressure to treat weeds if the conditions are less than optimal).

Importance of extension The LBG on-ground support component has facilitated excellent collaboration between applicants and professional support networks. Extension, particularly over a long time period, has allowed innovation and adaptation within the LBG. The contribution of local knowledge by land managers, who are provided with the opportunity to ask questions and receive feedback from the Landcare team, has maximised success, particularly for improving weed control techniques.

Land managers tend to be adaptive and have responded well to the LBG extension model. The model recognises that environmental unpredictability can make a project, that may look good on paper, unworkable or impractical on the ground, and the model has the flexibility to adapt as necessary. Thus, the model supports landowners for more sustainable

and long-term achievement of their projects, including weed management activities. Insight gained into behavioural influences, disincentives or motivations of proponents by the on-ground presence of project staff can help motivate and guide landholder involvement (Yee and Rolfe 2006). An intimate knowledge of each project and an understanding of the capacity and motivation of the proponents allows Landcare staff to work with proponents to limit project failure and enhance outcomes.

CONCLUSION

With a committed and robust devolved grant process, Landcare Tasmania is delivering the Landcare Biodiversity Grants to the highest standard. The devolved grants structure adopted and refined by Landcare Tasmania increases the effectiveness of funds delivered for landscape-scale weed management. The grant process remains open to innovation and adaptation, while limiting risk and maintaining rigour and technical integrity using a strategic, regional approach that is achieving measurable improvements to biodiversity values.

A careful governance process, considerate of project monitoring and timelines, and well supported by staff with the flexibility to remain practical, is achieving measurable on-ground benefits that have the potential to last. Through this process, the most valuable and strategic projects have been funded, ensuring the greatest benefit for every dollar invested.

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