

Buffel Grass Technical Working Group Communiqué No. 1

The Buffel Grass Technical Working Group (TWG) met for the first time on Thursday, June 1, 2023 in Alice Springs. Its role is to

Examine the existing and alternative management approaches to Buffel Grass and challenges associated with its distribution and;

To make recommendations to the Minister for the Environment, Climate Change and Water Security on future practices including legislative management tools that may be considered for managing the risks and impacts of Buffel Grass.

The TWG is made up of people with specific expertise or experience relevant to the management of Buffel grass. The group will provide recommendations to the Minister by 30 November 2023.

Membership of the group includes the Central Land Council representing Aboriginal land management, an Agronomist, Parks Australia representing Australian Government protected areas, a botanist, NT Parks and Wildlife representing NT Government protected areas, a pastoral land manager and a weeds researcher. The NT Department of Environment Parks and Water Security is convening the group and has a dedicated weeds scientist supporting its work.

Buffel grass is not a declared weed in the Northern Territory. It has been identified as a priority for strategic control in the Alice Springs Regional Weeds Strategy and a weed of concern in the Tennant Creek Regional Weeds Strategy.

At the first meeting members discussed the history of the introduction of Buffel Grass in Australia and its distribution. Members considered some of the benefits and impacts of Buffel, the management options we already use, and those that we haven't yet used, what the impacts of those management options are that we already know, and matters that require further investigation.

It was generally agreed that Buffel Grass has both beneficial and detrimental impacts to the landscape, economy, culture and lifestyle but the balance has changed over the last decade. It is prized by many pastoralists but there is increasing evidence that Buffel can impact directly and indirectly on biodiversity and cultural values.

The group discussed the way in which Buffel has changed fire regimes across extensive areas within the region. This includes the heat and speed of Buffel fuelled fires and the positive feedback loop between Buffel and fire leading to rapid regrowth, out competing native species and dramatic changes in species composition and vegetation structure. For this reason Buffel is widely considered a transformer species.

In the cultural context, Buffel spread has disrupted access to some country and cultural practices as it has colonised vast tracks of land that once had a rich diversity of native species and an abundance of bush tucker. It was suggested that the inability to carry out cultural practices in some locations may have contributed to unforeseen social wellbeing implications across the region.

The role that Buffel plays on pastoral lands for erosion control, dust suppression, improved landscape function and higher pastoral productivity was also discussed.

Notwithstanding the benefits, the group agreed that it was not in anyone's interest for Buffel Grass to dominate the landscape. With eradication being an unlikely outcome given the species' vast distribution, containment and protection of biodiversity, cultural and built assets are key strategies albeit not without

complexity. Preliminary results from herbicide treatment trials were discussed at some length with more investigation to be done on spraying as both a targeted and broad scale management technique. These and other management strategies will be considered in future meetings.

The TWG identified a range of matters that require further investigation. These include the capacity to develop higher resolution mapping techniques to help improve strategic planning; exploration of what opportunities arise through the Commonwealth Government's proposed Nature Repair Market legislation and Threatened Species Action Plan and; what outcomes have been achieved in other jurisdictions. To this end the Commonwealth Threatened Species Commissioner and a representative from Primary Industries and Regions South Australia have been invited to speak at the next meeting.

It was agreed that as the TWG membership is expertise and land management experience-based, some stakeholders not represented, who believe Buffel Grass has a direct or indirect impact on their sector or industry, can submit written information to the convener, John Gaynor, john.gaynor@nt.gov.au for consideration of the TWG.

Minutes from each meeting will published following confirmation by the TWG.