

Buffel Grass Technical Working Group Meetings 5 – Minutes

Date: Thursday 16 November 2023 Time: 9:15am – 2:32pm

Location: Conference Room, Tom Hare Building, Alice Springs, and MS Teams

Attendance

Members

- **Tracey Guest**, Natural and Cultural Resource Manager, Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, Parks Australia, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW).
- **Chris Materne**, Pastoral Production Officer, Agriculture, Fisheries and Biosecurity Division, Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade (DITT).
- **Nicole Hayes**, Station Manager, Undoolya Station.
- **A/Prof Christine Schlesinger**, Associate Professor, Environmental Science, Charles Darwin University (CDU), Alice Springs Campus.
- **David Albrecht**, Botanist, NT Herbarium Alice Springs, Flora and Fauna Division, (DEPWS).
- **Nick Ashburner**, Manager, Land Management, Central Land Council (CLC).
- **Sarah Fairhead**, Executive Director Southern Region, Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics (DIPL).
- **Phil Cowan**, Director, Central Australian Parks, Parks and Wildlife Division, DEPWS.

Convenor

- **John Gaynor**, Regional Director Southern, DEPWS.

Executive Officer

- **Michelle Franklin**, Senior Project Officer, Weed Management Branch, DEPWS.

Guests

- **Roni Opden**, Manager, Gamba Fire Mitigation Unit, DEPWS.

Minutes

- **Conni Warren**, On the Same Page Consulting.

Note that these are abridged minutes taken from the verbatim transcript.

General Business

Discussion and Amendments to Previous Minutes

- Discussion regarding minutes from the previous meeting, including amendments, which were discussed in session, and accepted out of session.

ACTION: Minutes from meeting 4 to be finalised and accepted out of session and then published on the NTG web page.

• Correspondence In

Correspondent received for the Technical Working Group

- Email from Philippa Mawby, Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara – 26 October 2023.
- Email from Rowena Withers, Ernabella Arts, Pukatja Community – 30 October 2023.
- Email from Margaret Opie – 1 November 2023.
- Letter from Rod Cramer, Temple Bar – 5 November 2023.
- Letter from the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress – 7 November 2023.
- Email from Uta Grehn – 9 November 2023.
- Letter from Gareth Catt, Desert Partnerships Manager, Indigenous Desert Alliance – 11 November 2023.
- Letter from Mick Haynes, Presiding Member, Alinytjara Wilurara Landscape Board – 13 November 2023.
- Letter from Rohan Sullivan, Cave Creek Station, TOPS Family Trust – 13 November 2023.
- Letter from Adrian Tomlinson, CEO, Arid Lands Environment Centre – 14 November 2023.
- Letter from Dr Anna Holwell, Head of Department, Medicine, NT Health – 15 November 2023.
- Email from Kim Hopper – 15 November 2023.
- Letter from Jimmy Cocking, CEO, Desert Knowledge Alliance – 15 November 2023.

General Discussion

- The convenor welcomed everyone, acknowledged the Arrernte people and country, and reminded members that their role requires them to be as impartial and as objective as possible, noting that each member is included for their technical expertise and experience to provide advice and recommendations to the Minister.
- The convenor also discussed that transparency has been prioritised, with information provided to the public. The only exclusion has been letters received from the public, as this is not a public enquiry, and although these submissions have been shared with members, letters won't be published. Letters have no new information not already known by the group.

- There was discussion regarding the challenges and feasibility of applying classifications to a buffel grass weed declaration, and it was agreed that a Weed Advisory Committee (WAC), through a statutory weed management plan, will need to consider the challenges and feasibility and account for this in its requirements.
- It was noted that the requirements of a statutory weed management plan, along with resourcing availability and allocation, will play a major role in determining prioritisation of management activities.
- It was discussed that although the Terms of Reference for this group apply to the entire Northern Territory, the expertise that is represented in the membership is focused on the Arid and Semi-Arid zones. The group discussed concerns regarding buffel grass in the northern parts of the NT, and whether or not recommendations coming from this group should include these regions.

Scope and Purpose

- The main objectives of this meeting were to review and agree on the list of objectives, and the draft recommendations.
- Conversation included the major purposes of the various legislation available, and settled on the *Weeds Management Act 2001* as being the primary legislation for most of the objectives because it is the only one that is designed specifically to manage growth and spread of weeds, while other legislation is focused on protecting and maintaining other values.

Review of objectives and potential declaration classes

- With the assistance of Roni Opden, the TWG cross referenced the agreed objectives from meeting 4 with available legislative levers and identified gaps to determine whether a weed declaration could address the gaps.
- The *Weeds Management Act 2001* was agreed to be the primary legislation being considered by the group to address most of the objectives. Other Acts provide complementary or alternative impact mitigation measures, which may come into use.
- The below refined list of objectives, legislation, and weed classification recommendations was agreed on with two dissenting views which were provided in writing and will be published in the final report.
- The dissenting views relate to knowledge of distribution, feasibility of control, cost of and responsibility for control, consistency of regulatory actions across different land tenure, questions of cost benefit to the Territory, impact on pastoral values, unintended impacts of control mechanisms, and availability of alternative pasture options.
- It was also agreed by the TWG that a WAC and a Statutory Weed Management Plan (SWMP) are critical to meeting all of these objectives.

Objectives:	Other Legislation available (besides the <i>Weeds Management Act 2001</i>):	<i>Weeds Management Act 2001</i> , Weed classification options:
Keep buffel grass out of clean areas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Pastoral Land Act 1992</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Class A, or Class B Class C (Part of NT).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It was agreed that the <i>Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999</i> is not available to address this objective and it was removed. Roni Opden added that under the <i>Weeds Management Act 2001</i> a Class C declaration can be used to prevent a weed getting in a part of the Territory when it is not there already. This was added. 		
Protect sites of high ecological value.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1976</i> <i>Pastoral Land Act 1992</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Class A, or Class B.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It was agreed that the <i>Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999</i> (EPBCA) is not available to address this objective, other than to inform a feed management plan, so it was removed. It was noted that the Threatened Species Commissioner said during meeting 2 that alignment with NT and federal policies and intent, it is more likely to lead to commonwealth support. 		
Protect cultural values.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Northern Territory Aboriginal Sacred Sites Act 1989</i> <i>Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1976</i> <i>Aboriginal Land Rights Act (Northern Territory) 1976</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Class A, or Class B.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One member expressed a view that a Class D declaration would not protect cultural values and it was removed. The EPBCA and <i>Heritage Act 2011</i> were considered as additional legislation, however the existing list was considered sufficient for this objective. 		
Fire protection around population centres and built assets.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Fire and Emergency Act 1996</i> <i>Bushfires Management Act 2016</i> 	[not required]
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There was a discussion about whether Bushfires NT protect outstations from fire. There were different experiences of the support given. It was noted that land holders are responsible for management of their own fire risks, regardless of the tenure, BFNT are primarily a regulatory, planning and coordination agency and where there is BFNT capacity, there is support provided. Roni Opden confirmed that regardless of legislation, everyone has responsibility to manage their own land, regardless of tenure, and that there is sufficient legislation to enforce, however the issue may be whether there is capacity to do it. Although it may be understood that managing grass would contribute to minimising fire risk, this is not the only possible outcome, and in the case of gamba grass, previous weed management actions contributed to a heightened fire risk in certain situations where gamba grass was killed and the dead grass was more flammable compared to green untreated areas. This may be a concern in some situations and would need to be addressed under the <i>Bushfires Management Act 2016</i>. 		
Reduce spread via transport corridors and mining operations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Mining Management Act 2001</i> <i>Environment Protection Act 2019</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Class B, or Class D.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It was noted that there may be other legislation that would support this objective. In order to compel mining operations to manage buffel grass, that would require a Class B declaration. If the objective is only to prevent them from spreading buffel grass, Class D would be sufficient. The scope of this objective was reviewed. It was noted as transport corridors and it was agreed that transport corridors needed to be explicit. Roni shared that the Weed Management Plan for Gamba Grass 2020-2030 defines transport corridors as: “a road as defined by the <i>Control of Roads Act 1953</i> or the <i>Local Government Act 2008</i> and the adjoining road reserve, or a railway corridor as defined by the <i>Australasian Railway (Special Provisions) Act 1999</i>.” 		
Prevent intentional sowing and introduction of new varieties.	[none]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any classification
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The verb in this objective was changed from “stop” to “prevent” as agreed by TWG. It was agreed that any classification would assist in meeting this objective, and that Class D is a minimum. It was also noted that the general duties in the <i>Weeds Management Act 2001</i> also address this objective. 		
More strategic approach to management, including minimising biodiversity loss.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Bushfires Management Act 2016</i> <i>Fire and Emergency Act 1996</i> <i>Pastoral Land Act 1992</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Zoned declaration, WAC, and SWMP.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The WAC and Statutory SWMP plan were added as they provide a more strategic approach. 		
Protect the value of the pastoral estate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Pastoral Land Act 1992</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Class D, Zoned declaration, WAC, and SWMP to recognise this objective.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The wording of this objective was discussed and some considered options were: 'don't decrease the value or inhibit the ability of the pastoral estate to be viable', 'reduce negative effects on the pastoral estate', 'consider the implications of a declaration on the pastoral estate', 'maintain the value of the pastoral estate', and 'protect the value of the pastoral estate, without threatening its viability'. There were concerns that some of these options were out of scope for the TWG. There was discussion about whether a 'buffel free' status will increase value of some properties and whether that will decrease the value of other properties as a result. Concerns were raised about delays in reviewing the policies around rangelands monitoring, however, it was noted that this could be prioritised if it was found to be necessary. It was discussed whether the requirement on the pastoral estate would be determined by the SWMP, for example it could define grazing as an appropriate management practice. Concern was raised around the objective to protect sites of ecological value (i.e. the East MacDonnell Ranges) on the pastoral estate. It was discussed that there would likely be triggers requiring higher levels of management in certain broad scenarios rather than individual requirements for specific properties. It was agreed that pastoralists should be supported with changes that occur that require significant management. Concerns was also raised around the issue of a declaration in the NT impacting on investment choices between the NT, WA and QLD, and result in reduction in land value. The group accepted the final wording as above with the SWMP to include the words: 'to recognise this objective'. 		
Minimise biodiversity loss in invaded areas through strategic management		

- Minimise biodiversity loss in invaded areas through strategic management
- The TWG discussed;
 - the protection of sites with biological value;
 - the feasibility of improving already invaded sites;
 - whether it was better included as part of the strategic management objective;
 - whether this captured species as well as sites, which would both be difficult and potential unrealistic in invaded areas; and
 - that strategic target areas should be where there is feasibility of protecting and improving biodiversity.
- It was agreed that this objective be folded into the Strategic Approach objective to say: “More strategic approach to management, including minimising biodiversity loss”.

Determine what reasonable measures are to prevent spread.

- *Environment Protection Act 2019*

- **WAC, and**
- **SWMP.**

- This was noted as a role for the WAC to determine in the SWMP. It supports the recommendation of establishing a WAC.

Review of Recommendations

- A comprehensive list of recommendations were drafted prior to the meeting, and examined out of session. During the meeting the list was examined again and agreed upon by a majority of the TWG. It is noted that there were two dissenting views among the eight members, full details of which will be provided in the final report.
- The discussion regarding the recommendations was as follows;

Weed declaration

- All members agreed to a weed declaration with one dissenting view.
- All members agreed to a zoned approach, with management goals for realistic management to occur.
- It was also agreed that the zoned approach should specify the southern half of the Territory (arid and semi-arid zones) specifically.
- The specific declaration class was changed to read “buffel grass be declared a Class B weed (growth and spread to be prevented) on all land in the southern arid and semi-arid zones within the Northern Territory, recognising that this declaration will have resourcing implications on all land tenures. This should be addressed by a WAC”.
- It was noted that a definition of pastoral land and pastoral estate is required as there is some land that is pastoral land that is not part of the pastoral estate.
- There was agreement on the importance of the WAC having broad industry, landholder, stakeholder and geographic representation.
- There was discussion around the resourcing implications on all landholders and that the impact is unknown until the WAC determines the details.
- The membership of a potential WAC (paid statutory appointments) was briefly discussed noting that anyone can nominate to be on the WAC, but that the minister approves membership.

- Concern was raised about the changes made removing the recommendation for declaration in the northern NT. It was suggested B is the default zone with other zoning determined by the WAC, as there are some areas that could benefit from not being declared or from being declared as Class A.
- The challenge of knowing the distribution and abundance of weeds in a vast and remote landscape was acknowledged.
- It was noted that a lot of the work that the WAC will require will take time, i.e. the granular mapping, may be a 2-year project. Over that time it was thought that the WAC could proceed using the best available probability map of presence of buffel grass. In time if it is possible to produce a density map, then decisions can be updated accordingly, however this will be more difficult than a distribution map.
- The TWG agreed (except for the two dissenting views) that there should be a recommendation for zoned Class B weed declaration, and that there will be areas where a WAC can make recommendations for an alternative requirements within that zone.
- Over time, as more detailed mapping becomes available, iterative management strategies will need to be updated to reflect best practice management planning according to known distributions and densities. An example from the Weed Management Plan for Gamba Grass was used, where properties below a certain size were required to eradicate by a set date in the future, with no location specified.
- Originally there was majority agreement that the final report should include an explanatory statement aimed at a diverse range of readers, other than the Minister. A dissenting view was raised and the convener clarified that the audience for this report is the Minister alone, and whether she chooses to disseminate it further, is not for the TWG to speculate on.
- An additional recommendation was added, for monitoring and evaluation of the growth and spread outside of the declared zone to the north, to inform the WAC of any need for an expansion of the declaration zone.

Establishment of a Weed Advisory Committee

- The wording of the recommendation to establish a WAC was adjusted to include the need to advise the Minister about the ongoing implementation of the weed management plan, and other matters relating to buffel grass.

Funding

- Discussion included the significant resource implications for forming and running a WAC, as there is no funding in existing budgets to do so.
- It was noted that the statement regarding continuity of funding is much bigger than just buffel. There is a broader need for a consistent funding pool that can be accessed based on need whether it is fire, flood or weed control, according to changing climate conditions and time.
- A suggestion was made to refine this recommendation to include continuity of funding required to sustain, and just in time funding is required over time, however this discussion was noted as possibly out of scope for the TWG.
- The TWG discussed the ongoing need for Landcare, ranger and non-government organisations' assistance and whether this should be captured under funding.

Knowledge on management practices

- It was noted that it has been known for quite a while that there is need for research into opportunistic spraying post rain or post fire.
- This was altered to include the detail of timing and feasibility and applied to broader scale spraying and slashing.
- Communication was raised as a barrier to good treatment timing, and an alert system idea was proposed in the discussion that would work with community and organisations to prompt spraying at optimal times. It was agreed that the dissemination and coordination of information provision was important.
- There was discussion about the existing knowledge on this and whether this research gap, being small, should be included. The wording of the recommendation was changed to include - "investigation of implementation and benefits of".
- There was discussion around whether the recommendation around research into controlled grazing should be deleted. The point was edited to apply more specifically to pastoral land, and any reference to grazing on parks was removed. Discussion also included the possibility of forgoing research, relying on existing knowledge and technology, and moving straight into implementation.
- There was discussion about whether the recommendation regarding knowledge of the impact of repeated slashing was specific to road corridors, and it was agreed that it was. Discussion included the idea that the problem is not a lack of knowledge, but more surrounding the cost effectiveness of the method. This recommendation was moved to 'best practice management'.
- The recommendation for research into the nature and purpose of land tenure with regard to the use of fire as a tool was removed, as it was decided that it is not actively used, and there is information already available.
- The discussion regarding partnering to explore new technology was clarified to include more than just manufacturers, but also industries that are going to benefit from it. This partnership is important because there are other organisations with a vested interest including peak bodies, other organisations and groups who may be called on to provide funding in some cases.
- The recommendation about research into biological control was expanded to include the risks.

Understanding the extent

- No changes were made to this section.

Best Practice Management Recommendations

- No changes were made to this section.

Education Programs

- The recommendation about changing burning practices from 'the old ways' in a changing landscape, was expanded to include all people, recognising that old burning practices, regardless of origin (Aboriginal or western), will need to be altered in the presence of buffel grass.

Policies

- The recommendation regarding a review and revision of the land condition assessment policies was altered to simplify its meaning and broaden its scope.

Logistics

- The convenor acknowledged the work of the members of the TWG to bring an impartial and objective approach to the process.
- The draft final report will be through on Friday 24 November to TWG members and the aim is to have the sign off by 27 of November to get something to the Minister by 30 November, which is a hard deadline.
- Further actions following submission are unclear. The minister will need to seek advice from other departments, industry and stakeholders.
- The convenor noted that the ABC was in contact the morning of the meeting, and that he would speak about the meeting on the radio, but that anything presented will be generalities.
- The final minutes will include detail that is privileged information with direct reference to the recommendations and views of the TWG, and as such will not be released until the final report is made public.
- A communique with only general information will be released as soon as possible, and minutes will probably be released after the report to the Minister is published which will be after the Minister has made a decision.
- A general conversation was held about the order the information would be released to the public.

Meeting closed

- The meeting concluded at 2:32pm.