

Buffel Grass Technical Working Group Meeting 2 – Minutes

Date: Wednesday 19 July 2023 Time: 9:00am – 1:25pm
Location: Conference Room, Tom Hare Building, Alice Springs, and MS Teams

Attendance

Members

- Nick Ashburner, Manager, Land Management, Central Land Council (CLC).
- 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).
- David Albrecht, Botanist, NT Herbarium Alice Springs, Flora and Fauna Division, Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security (DEPWS).
- Nicole Hayes, Station Manager, Undoolya Station.
- A/Prof Christine Schlesinger, Associate Professor, Environmental Science, Charles Darwin University (CDU), Alice Springs Campus.
- Andrew Turner, District Manager, Top End Northern Australian Parks, DEPWS (proxy for Phil Cowan).

Convenor

- John Gaynor, Regional Director Southern, DEPWS.

Executive Officer

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

Speakers

- Dr Fiona Fraser, Australian Government Threatened Species Commissioner, DCCEEW.
- Troy Bowman, SA Buffel Grass State Coordinator, Landscapes Alinytjara Wilurara, SA Government.

Guests

- Chris Day, Senior Director Parks and Wildlife Operations, DEPWS (additional proxy for Phil Cowan).
- Ben Kaethner, Regional Land Management Coordinator, CLC, (future proxy for Nick Ashburner)
- Liz Lindsay, Threat Policy and Planning, Biodiversity Division, DCCEEW.
- Claire Punch, Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet.

Apologies

- Phil Cowan, Director, Central Australian Parks, Parks and Wildlife Division, DEPWS.

Minutes

- Conni Warren, On the Same Page Consulting.

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

Meeting open

- Discussion regarding minutes and outcomes from the previous meeting. Several minor changes were discussed, and the updated minutes were accepted and approved by the group.

ACTION: Finalised minutes to be published on NTG web page.

General Discussion

Mapping

- The need for more granular mapping was discussed further, as well as integrating satellite information with done-captured imagery in target areas, and the possibility of using drones for broad acre spraying.
- The TWG agreed that both satellite and drone mapping are necessary for broad scale and asset management work, and both technologies require further development.

ACTION: Rene Bartolo, Chief Pilot from DCCEEW, to be invited to present her work on buffel grass mapping and AI software at a future meeting.

Guest Speaker – Dr Fiona Fraser

- Threatened Species Commissioner Dr Fiona Fraser gave a presentation on her role and her department's role in environmental management in general and as it relates to buffel grass management.
- She discussed the Convention on Biological Diversity, and buffel grass's consideration as a potential Key Threatening Process (KTP) along with other threats such as deer, pigs and chytrid, as well the decision to select cats, foxes, gamba grass and myrtle rust due in part to stronger state agency support, and the potential for stronger partnerships.
- The 110 priority species, including the Central Rock Rat, and the 20 Priority Places, including the MacDonnell Ranges, were chosen to have a wide spread ecologically, geographically, and culturally, and also so that work will have flow-on effects (co-benefits) to other threatened species.
- Buffel grass is captured under Novel Biota as a KTP placing native flora and fauna at risk and there is a Threat Abatement Advice (TAA), but no Threat Abatement Plan (TAP).
- Discussions on the timelines and progress of the National Established Weed Priorities (NEWP) Framework and nominations for Weeds of National Significance (WoNS).
- Dr Fraser discussed the threat to MacDonnell Ranges as a priority place and that buffel grass is a major threat to all of the biota in Central Australia. She noted that the focus is not on eradication but to manage spread to support threatened species, biodiversity and important cultural assets.
- Dr Fraser emphasised that when considering potential recommendations from this TWG, it is very important to demonstrate interest and commitment to exploring all the control tools available for better regulation and management of buffel grass.

- Dr Fraser suggested that Dr Natalie Rossiter-Rachor be invited to comment on the listing of gamba grass and how that affected management, the process and connection between declarations across Commonwealth, NT and other jurisdictions.

ACTION: Invite Dr Natalie Rossiter-Rachor to discuss the realised and potential on-ground benefits of WONS declaration.

- Dr Fraser recommended that the group act decisively and consider the economic, ecological, social and cultural impacts of not managing buffel grass when making recommendations to the Minister.
- Dr Fraser encouraged collaboration between sectors and expressed the Commonwealth's willingness to partner with government and non-government stakeholders.
- Dr Fraser expressed a preference for supporting actions where state and federal policy are aligned, to protect sites of ecological value and minimise the spread of buffel grass into these areas.

Guest Speaker – Troy Bowman

- South Australian buffel grass state coordinator Troy Bowman gave a presentation on the recent history of buffel grass in South Australia over the past ten years.
- A weed declaration was made using a zoned approach that takes into account the invasiveness, impact and feasibility of control. Enforcement activities were used in the lower density zones to enforce hygiene and spread prevention, however, asset protection activities in the densely infested areas were led by landholders and enforcement was not a factor.
- Troy talked about the importance of prioritising protection of high value environmental, cultural and economic assets and the need for a longer term commitment to sustained management action.
- He also emphasised the geographical, climatic and ecological, differences between the arid and semi-arid zones.
- He also discussed the benefits and challenges that have come from the weed declaration and observed that longer term financial commitment to sustained action will provide the best chance for improvements.
- The declaration provided enforceable incentives for control and prevention of spread through hygiene requirements and legislative responsibility in project proposals, particularly on new road construction projects into clean areas.
- The project included chemical trials including organically certified options, roadside surveys and development of a distribution database and prioritisation tool for control activities, as well as significant community engagement.
- Discussions regarding chemical control options centred on various combinations of glyphosate and flupropanate, similar to what is being trialled in the NT, as well as the pine oil additive which is approved for use on organically registered pastoral properties.
- The TWG and Troy Bowman agreed that collaboration between the Department of Primary Industries and Regions, South Australia (PIRSA) and DEPWS with assistance from various chemical producers should be explored to improve knowledge regarding chemical rates and application methods.
- Troy Bowman was interested in collaborating with potential new satellite and drone survey methodologies that will be explored as an outcome from this TWG.

- The TWG and Troy Bowman agreed that there was a need for cross-jurisdictional partnerships and a nationally consistent approach to secure ongoing commitment and prevent losing progress.
- The TWG agreed that a significant takeaway from this experience is the importance of using different zones, continuity of funding and, and engagement with landholders, particularly in transport corridors.

ACTION: South Australian Buffel Grass Project Summary and Fact Sheet to be distributed to the TWG.

General Discussion

Biological Control

- TWG discussed native and pre-existing biological control options that have been identified in Queensland and some which have already turned up in the NT.
- In the previous meeting, Marg Friedel pointed out the climatic differences that may limit the effectiveness of fungal agents, and Troy Bowman noted that SA would face the same challenge with moisture dependence.
- Dr Fraser recommended that it is best to keep all options open, and to have a variety of tools available, noting that biocontrol is a long term option, and it would be good to consider its effect over decades.
- Dr Fraser stated that the Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, may consider supporting R&D into biocontrol options. Discussions then turned to the Environmental Invasives Committee and their role in the biological control approvals processes.

ACTION: The TWG agreed that further advice should be sought regarding biological control approvals processes and research opportunities, with a guest speaker at a future meeting.

Weed Declaration

- The TWG discussed the feasibility of declaration, and potential advantages such as increased funding and partnership opportunities, as well as potential disadvantages, learning from the SA experience about the potential shortfalls, backlash from industry, and the potential for and costs to impact on other programs.
- Overview on the weed declaration categories, and how they might be applied, and then adjusted using a Statutory Weed Management Plan.
- Discussion on the potential to prevent introduction of new strains from Queensland, and the TWG agreed that further expert advice in this area is needed.

ACTION: Invite a representative from the Weed Management Branch to discuss legislative levers under the *Weeds Management Act 2001*.

- Nicole Hayes discussed a survey, which was conducted by the NT Cattlemen's Association (NTCA) asking members what they thought about a Class B declaration. Thirty-two responses were received, which represents a majority of pastoral properties in the region.

ACTION: If possible, Nicole Hayes will provide the full Class B declaration survey to members to read after seeking permission from NTCA.

- It was agreed that a more nuanced conversation is needed with all stakeholders including pastoralists, NTCA, and traditional owners regarding the control options for buffel grass and their potential impacts.

Management Options

- The currently available management actions were discussed at the previous meeting were recapped and agreed upon, those being:
 - **Buffel Busting** – Highly labour intensive but very effective over a small area for asset protection.
 - **Chemical** – Labour intensive, but when applied strategically, it has shown good impact in specific areas for asset protection. Opportunistic and strategically timed spraying post fire may be effective but requires further investigation.
 - **Slashing** – Used in combination with opportunistic spraying, has proven effective for asset protection but requires ongoing revisits to prevent regrowth. Anecdotal evidence from road corridors in the South West is that constant slashing promotes spread.
 - **Fire Breaks** – Created between large patches of fuel help to reduce the impact of buffel grass over a broader area.
 - **Competition** – Planting, promoting and irrigating alternative species in order to control buffel grass may create competition and also provide alternative habitat and food options for native fauna and stock.
 - **Grazing** – Can be used as a fuel reduction tool -potential negative impacts need further study.
 - **Fire** – Has been used extensively, and in some cases effectively for asset protection and has benefited the ecosystem by reducing and interrupting fuel loads. Positive feedback loop between fire and buffel may indicate continual fire in the landscape to be counterproductive. (refer Chemical Option above)
 - **Do Nothing** – Not acting is a possible course of action which may lead to buffel grass proliferation.
 - **Promotion** – Planting, promoting and irrigating buffel grass may be currently happening in an area to promote growth, replace native pastures that are less profitable and improve carrying capacity.

Legislative Levers

- Discussion on the potential legislative levers that are available for the management of buffel grass. These included the *Weeds Management Act 2001*, the *Bushfires Management Act 2016*, and the *Pastoral Land Act 1992*.
- It was agreed that expert advice is needed on the various legislative levers available within Acts, and that guest speakers should be sought for each one.

ACTION: In addition to the above listed invitation representing the Weed Management Branch, expert presentations should be sought from Bushfires NT and Pastoral Lease Administration.

Nature Repair Market

- Nature Repair Market was not discussed at any length during this meeting, and it was noted that this Commonwealth initiative is still subject to a senate committee process. It was suggested that valuable learnings about assessment methodology from the Carbon Credit Market may be applicable and that it would be worth hearing from Ben Kaethner about his experience in that area.

ACTION 8: Ben Kaethner from CLC to be invited to speak about assessment methodology in the Carbon Credit Market.

Logistics

- Next radio interview to be conducted by John Gaynor.
- Next meeting – Meeting 3 – 31 August 2023.
- Upcoming meetings – 5 October and 16 November 2023.

Meeting closed

- The meeting concluded at 1:25pm

Action List

Item	Due
1. Finalised minutes to be published on NTG web page.	ASAP
2. Rene Bartolo, Chief Pilot from DCCEEW, to be invited to present her work on buffel grass mapping and AI software at a future meeting.	Upcoming meeting
3. South Australian Buffel Grass Project Summary and Fact Sheet to be distributed to the TWG.	ASAP
4. The TWG agreed that further advice should be sought regarding biological control approvals processes and research opportunities, with a guest speaker at a future meeting.	Upcoming meeting
5. If possible, Nicole Hayes will provide the full Class B declaration survey to members to read after seeking permission from NTCA.	Upcoming meeting
6. Invite a representative from the Weed Management Branch, Bushfires NT and Pastoral Land Administration to discuss in further detail the legislative levers available under the <i>Weeds Management Act 2001</i> , the <i>Bushfires Management Act 2016</i> and the <i>Pastoral Land Act 1992</i> .	Meeting 3
7. Invite Dr Natalie Rossiter-Rachor to discuss the realised and potential on-ground benefits of WONS declaration.	Meeting 3
8. Ben Kaethner from CLC to be invited to speak about assessment methodology in the Carbon Credit Market.	Upcoming meeting