

Buffel Grass Weed Advisory Committee

Time: 10:00 to 2:00pm

Date: 18 and 19 April 2024

Location:

Thursday 18 April: AAB Large Conference Room, John Hayes building,
Arid Zone Research Institute (AZRI), Alice Springs

Friday 19 April: Meeting Room A, Office of the Chief Minister (OCM),
Alice Plaza, Alice Springs, and via MS Teams

Attendance:

As Ministerial appointments were not finalised, these two meetings were informal preliminary discussions amongst Committee members.

Attendees: Thursday 18 April

Phillip Cowan - Director, Central Australian Parks, Parks and Wildlife Division,
Northern Territory Government (NTG) Department Environment Parks and Water Security (DEPWS)

Tracey Guest - Natural and Cultural Resource Manager, Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, Parks Australia.

Alex Port - Environment Liaison Officer, Northern Territory (NT) Cattlemen's Association

Benjamin (Ben) Kaethner - Regional Land Management Coordinator, Central Land Council (CLC)

Garth Forrester - Ranger Group Coordinator Harts Range, Central Land Council

James (Jimmy) Cocking - Chief Executive Officer, Desert Knowledge Australia

Josef (Joe) Schofield - Regional Operations Manager, Central & South Australia,
Australian Wildlife Conservancy

Attendees: Friday 19 April

Jimmy Cocking - Chief Executive Officer, Desert Knowledge Australia
(10:00am-11:15am)

Joel Andrew - Director, Technical Services, Alice Springs Town Council

Daniel Capps - Director Policy and Industry Development,
NT Cattlemen's Association

Roy Chisolm - Pastoral Land Board

Ross Stanes - NT Cattlemen's Association, Director Lyndavale Cattle Co (via TEAMS)

Apologies: Nathaniel Staniford – Assistant Director Operations, Bushfires NT, DEPWS.

Chairperson: To be advised

Executive Officer: Roni Opden – Executive Officer, Rangelands Division,
Buffel Grass Weed Advisory Committee (WAC) DEPWS

Guests: Nil

Minutes: Roni Opden – Executive Officer, Buffel Grass WAC, DEPWS.

Thursday 18 April - Meeting open 10:00am

- The Executive Officer welcomed members and acknowledged Country.
- Attendees introduced themselves to each other.
- Buffel WAC: Discussion paper #1 - circulated prior to the meeting, forming the agenda for this first meeting.
- A 'live' map (NTG NR Maps) was displayed on the discussion board, and served as the basis for conversation on where and how a declaration could be applied.
- The Executive Officer presented a short PowerPoint presentation containing:
 - Recap of the 2023 Technical Working Group recommendations
 - Definition of a weed in a general vs legislative context
 - Committee focus – short (3 month) and long (3 year) term
 - Buffel distribution map (Weed Risk Assessment) and invasion curve philosophy (Australian Weed Strategy)
 - Approach to preparing a Buffel Strategy by end of June 2024

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

IN SUMMARY:

Members discussed the formation and goals of the Buffel Grass Weed Advisory Committee. The committee aims to address the impacts of buffel grass and consider legislative measures to support mitigation efforts. Short-term goals include identifying areas where buffel grass is problematic and how legislation can assist, while long-term goals involve research, education, and best practices. Concerns are raised about the spread of buffel grass, the need for targeted management, and changing attitudes towards control efforts. Members discussed the complexities of management, including resource allocation, land use, and community engagement. The meeting underscores the importance of informed decision-making and collaboration to effectively address the buffel grass issue.

The Buffel Grass Weed Advisory Committee (WAC) discussed the following topics in detail:

Conversation around the management of buffel grass as pasture and its impact on various stakeholders. Concerns include cattle grazing on roadside areas, the spread of buffel grass, and the potential implications of declaring it a weed. There is debate about the effectiveness of grazing as a control method, hybridization of buffel grass strains, and the economic value of buffel to pastoral lands. Stakeholders expressed differing opinions on whether a declaration would be beneficial and how alternative regulatory approaches could be beneficial. Additionally, there is discussion around the obligation of land managers, potential impacts on trade between states, and the need to allow diversification of land use. Overall, the conversation highlighted the complex issues surrounding buffel grass management and the need for pragmatic solutions that consider the diverse interests of stakeholders.

Discussion around the management and prevention of the spread of invasive species, particularly buffel grass. Participants discussed various strategies, which included declaring buffel a weed, implementing fire breaks, and enforcing regulations to control growth and spread. There are concerns about the effectiveness of regulations, practical challenges in enforcement, and the need for collaboration among landowners and government agencies. Ideas are exchanged regarding buffer zones, compliance measures, and the implications of declarations on land management practices. The discussion also touched on environmental impacts, such as groundwater depletion, and the importance of considering long-term sustainability.

The conversation continued around the management of buffel grass and other invasive species in the Northern Territory. Speakers discussed the need for a strategic plan to tackle these weeds, considering factors like resource allocation, funding opportunities, workforce availability and capability, and community engagement. There was a focus on creating realistic and effective management strategies, including classification of weeds into different categories based on their level of threat and appropriate management actions. The importance of education, training, and collaboration between different stakeholders is highlighted as essential for successful weed management efforts. Overall, the discussion emphasized the need for a comprehensive approach that balances environmental conservation with practical management practices.

Members discussed classifications, strategies, enforcement, and community involvement around planning and managing buffel grass, in Alice Springs town. Various aspects of weed management plans were considered, including nominations for management sites, potential costs, and resource allocation. Overall, the dialogue underlined the importance of collaboration, planning, and adapting to local conditions in weed management efforts.

Participants discussed the complexities of managing this invasive species, considering impact on cultural, biodiversity, and infrastructure aspects and deliberated on various approaches, including the possibility of declaring certain areas for protection and implementing specific management plans tailored to different land tenures. The discussion also touched on the challenges of enforcement, the importance of education, and the potential for incentives and rewards to encourage compliance and proactive management. Overall, members stressed the need for a comprehensive and flexible approach to address the multifaceted issues associated with buffel grass management.

Members considered the practicalities and implications of a buffel weed declaration, including the need for different management requirements, for different types of land. Concerns were raised about the impact on pastoral industries and the necessity of managing the spread of the weed effectively. Strategies such as compliance policies and management plans were suggested to address these issues. Overall, there was a consensus on the need for further discussion and planning to ensure effective weed management strategies are implemented.

Further discussion around the use of various Acts, such as the Weeds Management Act and the Bushfires Management Act, to address grass fire impacts. The approach discussed is primarily focused on education and measures of compliance rather than penalties. There is also talk about different management zones and the concept of declared areas for control. Discussions cover a wide range of topics including the role of different organizations, concerns about administrative processes, potential economic impacts, and the need for effective management techniques. The conversation also touched on the appointment of a Chairperson for the WAC and the importance of making decisions and moving forward with actionable plans.

Break 12:30pm – 1:00pm

Meeting closed 2:00pm

Friday 19 April - Meeting open 10:00am

- The Executive Officer welcomed members and acknowledged Country.
- Attendees introduced themselves to each other.
- Buffel WAC: Discussion paper #1 - circulated prior to the meeting, forming the agenda for this first meeting.
- A 'live' map (NTG NR Maps) was available on the discussion board, to inform conversation on where and how a declaration could be applied.
- The Executive Officer presented a short PowerPoint presentation containing:
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IN SUMMARY:

The Buffel Grass Weed Advisory Committee (WAC) discussed various topics related to managing buffel grass, including strategies for containment and asset-based protection, experiences from gamba grass management programs, the need for focused resources and regulation. Forming a consensus that the strategy should be research and evidence based, with an emphasis on outcomes.

The WAC highlighted the importance of biodiversity protection and fire management, noting the threat of buffel grass to flora and fauna in areas like the MacDonnell Ranges. Members emphasized the need for prioritised approaches to mitigate buffel grass impacts in significant landscape areas and Indigenous Protected Areas (IPA).

Concerns were raised about the potential consequences of declaring buffel grass as a weed, including regulatory costs and budgetary pressures. Participants stressed the need for thorough research, economic modelling, and public education to inform any decisions.

The discussion also addressed communication strategies, ongoing funding, and the importance of comprehensive mapping and planning efforts. Overall, there was a recognition of the complexity involved and the need for informed decision-making and collaboration among stakeholders.

The Buffel Grass Weed Advisory Committee (WAC) discussed the following topics in detail:

Traditionally when designing management and control strategies for a very widespread invasive species, best practice is a containment, asset based, protection approach; working from the perimeter inwards. Focussing resources into the centre of the area, allows for expansion and continued growth on the outskirts.

Experience from the Top End gamba grass management programmes, education, awareness and compliance strategies, revealed at times resources went to areas where people were not necessarily experiencing impacts of gamba.

To ensure best use of resources and optimal results, the WAC will focus on areas where buffel grass is impacting, what those impacts are, appropriate mitigation strategies and how regulation will support achievement of objectives.

Current management practice, approaches, techniques, incentives, use of buffel grass and where buffel might be managed as a weed was discussed.

MacDonnell Ranges is identified in Federal Government's Threatened Species Action Plan, acknowledging buffel grass as a key threat to flora and fauna; further noting the need for strategic management of buffel grass. Federal Government are looking to invest in the interests of protecting biodiversity, there is a \$5M funding program being developed.

Stakeholders are looking to mitigate impact of buffel grass within landscape areas, sites of conservation significance, around River Red Gum trees, key river beds and Indigenous Protected Areas (IPA).

Concerns were raised about buffel grass already present further north in the Top End; the Terms of Reference for this WAC is for Central Australia.

Members discussed mitigating the impacts of buffel grass, focusing on biodiversity, habitat displacement, fire management and asset protection. There is a push for regulatory approaches to protect areas from buffel grass impacts, with considerations of various tools and strategies. Conversations touched on potential declarations for different regions and the need for weed management plans, with an emphasis on resourcing and incentives for land managers. Long-term reforms, interactions with existing legislation, and community education were also discussed. Despite various perspectives, there is a shared recognition of the need for resources to manage buffel grass impacts, while minimizing disruptions to land use practices.

The conversation stressed concerns about potential unintended consequences of declaring buffel grass a weed. Members express the need for thorough understanding of the economic impacts and practicalities before making a declaration. There is recognition of the complex management issues, including costs and community expectations, emphasizing the importance of avoiding a simplistic approach and suggest conducting economic modelling to assess the implications of a declaration.

The potential consequences of declaring buffel grass a weed: members express concerns about the regulatory costs and budgetary pressures associated with a declaration. Highlighting the need for thorough consideration of funding models and management plans, emphasizing the importance of coordination and collaboration among various stakeholders. Concerns are raised about the impact on pastoral land valuation and potential default triggers within financing agreements. Overall, there's a recognition of the complexity involved and the need for careful planning to address the challenges effectively.

A member noted the low prevalence of other weeds in the region currently, acknowledging isolated patches of weed and the need to consider various factors before making a decision. Concerns are raised about the significant legislative changes required, potential unintended consequences, and the long-term management strategies needed. Issues such as cultural impact, existing legislation, resource allocation, and funding mechanisms are also discussed. Overall, there is a consensus on the complexity of the issue and the need for careful consideration and long-term planning before any action is taken.

One viewpoint suggested exploring alternative funding structures rather than adding regulatory costs. Self-nominated sites for management are discussed, emphasizing the need for targeted approaches. Concerns about public perception, political pressure, and the complexity of the issue are highlighted. There is a call for thorough investigation, feasibility studies, and public education to inform decisions. Misinformation on social media is identified as a challenge that needs to be addressed. Overall, the discussion underscores the importance of informed decision-making and public engagement in managing buffel grass effectively. A DEPWS implemented and managed, public facing communication hub, is critical to ensuring factual information is publicly available and misinformation can be addressed; monitoring social media is also important.

Questions around existing funding grants, ie Central Land Council (CLC) Ranger groups, and note that they may not necessarily be used to prioritise buffel control currently.

Further talk around the need for effective communication, ongoing funding, and thorough research in addressing buffel grass management in Central Australia. Suggestions included establishing a communication strategy to counter misinformation, securing long-term funding for research and management, and conducting feasibility studies for pilot sites. Concerns are raised about resource availability, including time and funding, to address the various challenges posed by buffel grass. Emphasis is placed on the importance of understanding the spatial distribution of buffel grass and prioritising areas for management based on their significance and level of infestation. Generally, the discussion underscored the complexity of the issue and the need for comprehensive, well-informed approaches to address it effectively.

Suggestion that pilot sites should be considered, with a 5 year time frame to see benefits of management.

Final conversation centred on the flexibility of a declaration and the availability of resources to address buffel grass management. Various maps, including those showing fire history, high fire danger areas, buffel spread and a mock-up map based on a discussion paper identifying areas for protection, are discussed as potential resources. The group expressed a desire for more comprehensive mapping and planning efforts.

Break 12:30pm – 1:00pm

Meeting closed 2:00pm

Next meetings

- Meeting 2–
- Meeting 3–
- Meeting 4–

Actions list

Action	Who	Due	Status
2023 Buffel Grass Technical Working Group report - circulate	Roni Opden	09May24	Complete
Buffel Grass Weed Risk Assessment – circulate	Roni Opden	09May24	Complete
Introduction slides – circulate	Roni Opden	09May24	Complete
Umuwa Statement – circulate	Roni Opden	09May24	Complete
Gamba Fire Mitigation Compliance Policy - circulate	Roni Opden	09May24	Complete