

Buffel Grass Weed Advisory Committee

Time: 8:50am

Date: 27 June 2024

Location: Conference Room, Office of the Chief Minister, Alice Plaza, Alice Springs

Attendees:

- **Philip Cowan** - Director, Central Australian Parks, Parks and Wildlife Division, Northern Territory Government (NTG) Department Environment Parks and Water Security (DEPWS)
- **Tracey Guest** - Natural & Cultural Resource Manager, Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, Parks Australia.
Arrived 8.55am
Absent 9.32am - Return 9.42am
- **Roy Chisholm** - Pastoral Land Board
- **Nathaniel Staniford** - Assistant Director Operations, Bushfires NT, DEPWS
via TEAMS
- **Garth Forrester** - Ranger Group Coordinator Harts Range, Central Land Council A
Arrived 8:49am
Absent 10.47am - Return 10.52am
- **James (Jimmy) Cocking** - Chief Executive Officer, Desert Knowledge Australia
Absent 9.40am - Return 9.43am
- **Josef (Joe) Schofield** - Regional Operations Manager, Central & South Australia, Australian Wildlife Conservancy
via TEAMS
- **Alex Port** - Environment Liaison Officer, Northern Territory (NT) Cattlemen's Association
via TEAMS
- **Ross Stanes** - NT Cattlemen's Association, Director Lyndavale Cattle Co
- **Joel Andrew** - Director, Technical Services, Alice Springs Town Council
Absent 9.40am - Return 9.42am

Chairperson: Philip Cowan

Executive Officer: Roni Opden - Buffel Grass Weed Advisory Committee, Rangelands Division, DEPWS

Guests: Nil

Minutes: Tabitha Fudge - Support Officer, Buffel Grass WAC, Rangelands, DEPWS

If you require [workplace adjustments](#) to participate in this meeting, please let the meeting organiser know.

1. Meeting open and welcome: 8:50am

Chairperson:

Welcome.

Acknowledge and pay respects to Arrernte peoples, as the First Nations people of this country and acknowledge their continuing connection to the lands, water and communities.

Thanks members for their ongoing commitment and time.

Advises Ross and Tracy are on their way and will be here shortly.

2. Apologies:

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

3. Disclosure of interest: real, potential or perceived:

Garth Forrester advised at 12JUN24 WAC meeting that he will be attending Arid Lands Environment Centre (ALEC) ARRWENNGKELTHE event on 29JUN24 as a private citizen. Reiterated at 27JUN24 meeting and advised he will be sitting on the information Q and A panel.

Tracey Guest will be attending the ALEC ARRWENNGKELTHE event on 29JUN24 and will be sitting on the information Q and A Panel, in her capacity as Natural and Cultural Resource Manager, Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, Parks Australia.

Roni Opden will be attending the ALEC ARRWENNGKELTHE event on 29JUN24 and will be sitting on the information Q and A Panel, in her capacity as Weeds Branch, DEPWS.

4. Minutes previous meeting:

12JUN24

Moved: Jimmy Cocking

Seconded: Ross Stanes

Approved out of session

That the Minutes are a true and accurate record of the meeting.

5. Business Arising from the Minutes:

5.1 Action Items from previous WAC meeting

Actions list			
Action	Who	Due	Status
WAC members provide response to Agenda Item 9.6 21MAY24 Joe Schofield has provided a response.	All WAC		Ongoing
Investigate potential Federal funding that would be available for the Territory if buffel grass was declared a weed.	Tracey Guest		Ongoing
Source alternate brands of Flupropanate – Tussock, Taskforce	Tracey Guest		Ongoing
Interpret herbicide labels	Roni Opden Joe Schofield		Ongoing
Circulate existing Buffel Grass Weed Management Guide for Central Australia	Roni Opden		Ongoing
Contact Troy Bowman re spray trials – African lovegrass	Roni Opden		Ongoing
Assess and build Ranger groups capacity ie equipment	Garth Forrester		Ongoing
Circulate list for Australian Certified Organic herbicide. USDA has a different process to Australia.	Ross Stanes		
Follow up on Phos-Chek foam – process for organic status.	Nathaniel Staniford		Completed 27JUN24
TEAMS channel for correspondence	Secretariat		

WAC recap on Actions list:

Pine oil is a substance listed with Australian Certified Organic Standard.

Consider developing a contextualised ‘best practice guideline’, which could include aerial/boom spraying, non/chemical control options, fire management, vehicle hygiene etc – refer Department of Primary Industries and Regions, South Australia (PIRSA) lists control options.

Fire retardant - primarily using foam, which has no real fertiliser effect. Phos-Chek AA1 may have fertilising properties, Nathaniel Staniford will circulate information – landholders can apply to not have it used in a fire situation.

Discussion includes the significant land management funding (including weed specific) already available through various avenues. Funding needs to be specifically directed, ie some Ranger groups report they are keen to manage buffel grass, but lacking appropriate equipment impedes efforts - CLC to follow up. Further highlighting a need to prioritise management, with a targeted and strategic approach, with follow up as a focus.

Financial cost in complying with a Strategy or declaration (of buffel as a weed) is deliberated; compliance can be viewed as setting out standards to follow, which can be validating actions already being taken, or changing current practices to the Strategy's suggested reasonable actions, ie a focus on vehicle/machinery hygiene, public/tourist education and awareness through road side signage. There is concern around unintended consequences (specifically financial cost) of a declaration; acknowledging that many years of inaction is not a viable course of action to continue, with recent fires in Alice Springs cited as an example of why.

The WAC's task is to develop a Strategy, there is no regulatory component to a Strategy; the Strategy is about management. Should the Minister announce a declaration, there will be time for more consultation and feedback, in addition to what the TWG and government have already done.

6. Correspondence Out:

Nil

7. Correspondence In: circulated to WAC out of session

In response to 21MAY24 Agenda item 9.6 - 05JUN24 email to stakeholders, response received from:

- Alice Springs Landcare
- Arid Lands Environment Centre (ALEC)
- Buffel Action Network
- Stride Resources

Received via email: ALEC NT Buffel Grass Position Paper, original and revised.

Received emailed letters from:

- Pastoral Land Board (PLB) emailed to WAC 25JUN24
- Chief Executive of NT Cattlemen's Association Inc. (NTCA) – distributed hard copy to WAC members at meeting 27JUN24.

8. Business Arising from Correspondence:

Executive officer Roni Opden advises Buffel Grass WAC, that with the Chair's authorisation, she has accepted ALEC's invitation to sit on the panel at the ARRWENNGKELTHE event on Saturday, 29JUN24 at Olive Pink Botanic Garden Alice Springs. This will be in her capacity as a Weeds Branch, DEPWS employee, not as a spokesperson for the WAC.

Chair advises members, to submit a response to Item 9.6 meeting 21MAY24.

WAC to deliberate the PLB and NTCA correspondence during this meeting.

Tracey Guest advises her participation in ALEC event 29JUN24 – will be as a representative of Parks Australia in her employed capacity.

Garth Forrester advises he will be attending ALEC event 29JUN24 as private citizen.

WAC agrees to Terms of Reference typo to be rectified by Executive Officer Roni Opden, per correspondence from Buffel Action Network.

Secretariat to organise a TEAMS channel for correspondence.

9. General Business:

9.1 Members are kindly reminded to uphold impartiality and objectivity in all discussions and decisions, noting that the Minister has appointed each member for their technical expertise and experience; to provide advice and recommendations to the Minister by 30 June 2024.

The Minister formed the WAC specifically to **develop a Buffel Grass Strategy for Central Australia that prioritises areas and methods where direct management actions will be most valuable and effective.**

The Strategy will inform the development of a Buffel Grass Draft Weed Management Plan.

Should the WAC determine buffel grass be a declared weed, classification may or may not follow. Classification is not a mandatory next step of declaration.

Classification according to the Weeds Act, is outside of the WAC's Terms of Reference (ToR).

NT Government announced in Budget 2024, \$750K for program management, planning and technical services to implement buffel grass management in Central Australia.

Transparency has been prioritised, with information being provided to the public online and via media.

9.2 Executive officer Roni Opden – Presentation and Discussion: Buffel Grass Management Strategy: Central Australia – Final Draft and Approval

9.2.1 Maps

9.2.2 Tables

9.2.3 Final Review

9.3 Executive officer Roni Opden – Discussion Procedure/Next steps

9.3.1 Finalise Strategy

WAC discussion – 9.2 to 9.3.1

Chair states that the intent for the meeting today is to finalise and approve the Strategy.

Previous WAC workshops have created the Strategy, requiring slight adjustments for private conservation areas to be listed (Woodgreen Station (on pastoral lease), Newhaven Wildlife Sanctuary, Mount Wedge) as well as Government listed sites.

Clarification on points 5.2 Non-chemical control and 5.2.4 Livestock grazing control methods and appropriate use, amendments made.

WAC will continue work into the future on linking in with the work being done at a national level, research, trials etc.

Clarification is sought around the Weeds Act, hierarchy and terms - strategy, declaration, and statutory plan. The dynamic nature of strategy documents is discussed; how they can evolve to encompass new techniques, management options etc as they arise.

At a national level, the Weeds of National Significance (WoNS) discussion group is looking at a proposal for national best practice guidelines.

“Reasonable management actions” are discussed with an enforcement lens.

Building capacity through education, communication and partnerships, using various platforms ie workshops, medias, signage, pilot sites, etc is recognised as fundamental to Strategy success.

The Strategy references existing literature, management templates available in section 6, for example the Alice Springs Regional Weeds Strategy 2021-2026.

There are concerns around managing public expectations once a Strategy and or declaration are announced/enacted, members note education and communication will play a crucial role.

BREAK 10:55am

RECONVENE 11:33am

Chair reiterates the intent for this meeting is to finalise and approve the Strategy; the WAC will now clarify and resolve points of contention.

WAC discussion - 9.2 to 9.3.1 continued:

The consultation time frame for buffel grass: it is acknowledged the consultation process has been ongoing over many years; some members stating they have been involved with various committees for over a decade, accepting the WAC is working to a brief time frame.

In a formal weed risk assessment (2022), buffel is determined to be a high impact weed, with low feasibility of control – likely influencing declaration status in the past. Some WAC recommendations on management actions (in the Strategy) would become enforceable if supported by declaration. Declaration is the Minister's decision; the WAC can make a recommendation, not a decision.

Should the Minister choose to declare, the WAC would reconvene to develop a Draft Weed Plan, which would be made available for a minimum of 4 weeks public consultation, longer consultation periods are recommended. The draft plan may be adjusted to incorporate relevant feedback from the consultation process. With a Weed Plan comes legal obligation, which the WAC would monitor and provide ongoing advice to the Minister.

The Draft Declaration Schedule (Schedule) circulated for discussion, provides more clarity around obligations under a declaration and is subject to what is 'reasonable, intentional, and reckless,' terminology regulators use to guide them, ie 'an owner or occupier must take all reasonable actions'. Compliance is encouraged through an educative process, not a punitive approach.

Consideration is given to how a declaration may support the Strategy. It is noted that the Terms of Reference (ToR) do not refer to declaration, however to draft weed management plans. The Minister has publicly stated the WAC's role would be to determine and advise on the impacts and practicality of a weed declaration for buffel. The WAC can deliver a Strategy and offer to develop a plan, although developing a plan prior to declaration is seen as premature.

Correspondence coming into the WAC is noted by members. Members are reminded of their confidentiality and Chatham House Rules obligations, under the Terms of Reference.

Impact of declaration to industry is further discussed: it is not in the WAC's remit to provide cost benefit analysis of any potential regulatory burden. Vehicle hygiene, not using buffel for rehabilitation etc. are already practices being followed by the mining industry, Department Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics (DIPL) tenders etc. Weeds Act protects the NT economy, environment, assets etc. It is acknowledged that industry does not bear the brunt of cost alone, Tax payers through various Government Departments ie Parks, DIPL, councils etc, spend significant amounts on weed management and the repercussions (ie fire) of unmanaged weeds.

Concerns around impact on pastoral interests include: buffel hay, improvements to pastoral land, may make properties less attractive than interstate counterparts. The Strategy's underlying tenure, land use, purpose and goal will suitably mitigate these concerns.

Chair reiterates that the consultation process to date has been more than adequate and that the WAC is in a position to vote on the Strategy.

WAC makes minor amendments to the Strategy and votes unanimously to approve the Draft Buffel Grass Management Strategy: Central Australia 2024 – 2030.

BREAK 1:11pm

RECONVENE 2:17pm

Chair thanks the WAC for working collaboratively to develop and approve the Buffel Grass Management Strategy: Central Australia 2024 – 2030.

9.3.2 If declaration recommended

9.3.3 If Weed Management Plan recommended

**9.4 Executive officer Roni Opden – Presentation & Discussion
The Weeds Management Act 2001**

9.4.1 Weeds Act overview/recap

9.4.2 Weed Management Plans (Division 2)

**9.5 Executive officer Roni Opden – Workshop
Declaration Recommendation: Options & Process**

WAC discussion: 9.3.2 to 9.5

Concerns around: time spent on consultation (ample/inadequate), not all members are comfortable with voting on declaration due to unknown implications for others outside their level of experience. Members acknowledge they were appointed to represent stakeholder groups based on their expertise.

Members express reservations around unknown costs to stakeholders and existing expense to the public purse.

If a declaration is made without the suggested Draft Declaration Schedule, the whole Weeds Act could be applied to the declaration.

From a fire management perspective, it is established that buffel is the larger fuel source, the Strategy looks to control and prevent fire, and there is a need for the Strategy to be enforceable (declaration) to limit fires across the Central Australia region. The Draft Declaration Schedule has been aligned with the Strategy's "reasonable actions" to ensure enforceable buffel actions that would also help mitigate fire risk and severity.

The following 4 points are agreed upon and supported in the vote:

The WAC recommends that:

- 1. Buffel be declared a weed in accordance with section 7 (1) of the Weeds Management Act 2001 – “The Minister may, by Gazette notice, declare a plant to be a declared weed for the purposes of preventing the plant entering into or managing the plant in, the Territory or a part of the Territory.”**
- 2. Subject to declaration, the WAC would draft a weed management plan in accordance with Division 2 of the Weeds Management Act 2001, for consultation.**

3. Consultation of a draft weed management plan should be open for public comment for period of at least 8 weeks.
4. No enforcement or obligation before the weed management plan is gazetted.

Chair thanks members for working together in a collaborative manner and formally closes the meeting.

Meeting close 3:56 pm