Buffel Grass Technical Working Group Communiqué No. 3

The Buffel Grass Technical Working Group (TWG) met for a third time on Thursday 31 August 2023, in Alice Springs. The TWG is examining management approaches and challenges of buffel grass control including potential weed declaration options. The Group will make recommendations to the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Water Security by 30 November 2023 on future management practices to mitigate the risks and impacts of buffel grass. The TWG is made up of people with specific expertise or land management experience relevant to the management of buffel grass.

At the third meeting, members received a presentation on the powers contained within the *Weeds Management Act 2001*, the role of statutory weed management plans, the levers available in the *Bushfires Management Act 2016* as management and compliance tools, and the interaction of the *Pastoral Land Act 1992* with the *Weeds Management Act 2001*.

Members heard that there are four declaration classifications in the Territory under the *Weeds Management Act 2001*. A plant may be declared a Class A weed where it is subject to total eradication in a designated area, a Class B weed, where growth and spread is to be controlled, a Class C weed, where it is not to be introduced into the Territory or a Class D weed, to be prevented from being spread by the actions of persons.

Classifications may apply to all or only parts of the Territory and a weed may have more than one classification depending on the nature of the land use of the area in focus and the outcome being sought.

All weed declarations regardless of class, result in the weed being subject to the general duties stipulated in the *Weeds Management Act 2001* that includes compliance with any statutory weed management plan relevant to the weed. A declared weed cannot be sold or purchased, and must not be propagated, nor brought into, stored or transported in the Territory.

A Weed Advisory Committee may be established by the Minister following the declaration of a weed to draft and oversee the implementation of a statutory weed management plan. A statutory plan will define:

- The area applicable and the classification of the declared weed,
- The general and specific objectives, and methods to achieve them, and to prevent the spread within or from the area to which the plan relates, and
- The requirements for monitoring the results of the plan.

A statutory plan may also stipulate additional requirements such as inspection procedures, land rehabilitation processes, the use of declared weeds under permit, education programs and management assistance available.

Weed declaration places the onus on land holders to manage their weeds according to the level of declaration applicable to their land. Declaration may be most beneficial when combined with complementary measures and where appropriate, the combination of other regulatory powers.

The members heard that although a weed declaration may provide a regulatory environment for the management of a weed, its impacts are limited to specified weed control and the requirements may not deliver the fire risk mitigation outcomes being sought. The *Bushfires Management Act 2016* is an excellent tool for managing fuel loads. This *Act* as well as the *Fire and Emergency Act 1996*, can require land holders to manage their fuel loads through fire break and flammable material warnings and notices and through property and area fire management plans.

The combined application of the *Weeds Management Act 2001* and the *Bushfires Management Act 2016* can be an effective way of concurrently managing weeds and fire risk.

NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT

In application, an effective compliance approach is important to remain responsive to the various landholders' effort and ability, with tailored responses to influence landholder behaviour in a positive way. This is achieved through education to ensue landholders understand their responsibilities, and receive relevant support to drive voluntary compliance. Non-compliance is discouraged by enforcing penalties where required.

The *Pastoral Land Act 1992* creates tenure for land to be leased from the Crown to operate pastoral enterprises. The objectives of the *Pastoral Land Act 1992* primarily relate to the sustainable development of land and the economic viability of the Northern Territory's pastoral estate. It is a condition of all pastoral leases, that they be managed in such a way as to promote or retain biodiversity. The *Pastoral Land Act 1992* provides for the Pastoral Land Board to administer and monitor pastoral leases and report regularly on the land condition of the pastoral estate on behalf of the Pastoral Minister.

The Group heard that declaration of buffel as a weed, depending on the declaration location, may have a contradictory influence on land condition reports, as buffel grass has high value use as a pasture species, used as fodder and for soil stabilisation.

Members also discussed alternatives to the use of buffel grass. Substitute grasses mentioned did include native species, however due to the lack of available seed stocks, it is more often alternative introduced species that would be used. It was explained that the characteristics that define a pasture improving species include weediness, and this is what makes them fit for that purpose. An example that was used to illustrate this point was Sabi Grass, which displays similar qualities such as weediness, ease of establishment, nutritional value and quick growth. These attributes are considered ideal for soil stabilisation, drought resistance and reliable fodder. For the purposes of soil rehabilitation, in areas where there is existing surrounding buffel grass, seeding is not necessarily required due to a generally abundant seed bank. Good grazing land management fosters perennial grasses and this in itself promotes buffel grass spread. Alternative native grass seed sources are in low supply, are therefore comparatively expensive leading to low take up.

The positive feedback loop between fire and buffel grass was again highlighted, noting that the biggest risk to biodiversity is through fire. The negative impacts of buffel grass pastures was discussed, and while it was agreed that the changing fire regime and subsequent rapid habitat loss was the most significant negative impact of buffel grass, there are other significant biodiversity loss impacts, even in the absence of fire, that should also be considered. The need for the development of improved fire risk mitigation techniques was discussed with alternatives to constant burning including grazing and technology assisted, targeted and broad scale herbicide techniques requiring further investigation. The impact of slashing and seed distribution was canvassed with agreement that the place of herbicide treatment as an alternative to constant slashing also needs further exploration.

In general discussion members heard that the 2022 weed risk assessment of buffel grass had not changed from the original assessment conducted in 2009, and remains a "very high". The weed risk assessment system uses a risk management matrix based on risk and feasibility of control. It identifies that buffel grass be managed through targeted control and protecting priority sites.

Members agreed that there is a need for a holistic approach with clarity around the purpose and priorities for management across different areas. While there are complications in having varying weed management approaches across multiple zones, there is a requirement to contain the plant from spreading into some areas of high ecological and cultural value where it isn't already present, and slowing the spread in other areas.

The next meeting of the Technical Working Group will be held in the week of 2 October 2023.