

Michael O'Donoghue



14 January 2017

Mr Glenn Butcher MP  
Chair Agriculture and Environment Committee's Inquiry - invasive plants (weeds)  
Parliament House  
Alice and George Streets  
Brisbane Q 4000

Dear Mr Butcher,

I would be most pleased if you accepted my submission to the Agriculture and Environment Committee's Inquiry into the impacts of invasive plants (weeds) and their control in Queensland. My submission deals with fireweed only as I have no experience with prickly acacia or giant rats tail grass. My submission focuses on federal, state and local government weeds programs, their coordination, achievements and the whole of government approach.

In my opinion, fireweed has spread because the Queensland community has not been sufficiently attentive or alert. I hope that the work of your Committee can provide the spark for Queensland to rally against fireweed.

I have made my best effort to relay personal experiences with fireweed on my property and my observations of fireweed in south east Queensland. I have also made some criticisms, suggestions and recommendations for your Committee to consider.

I wish you and your committee well with your work.

Regards,

Michael O'Donoghue



## **Inquiry into the impacts of invasive plants (weeds) and their control in Queensland**

This submission is principally about fireweed and matters that relate to the management of its control. I first became aware of fireweed near my 55-hectare property at Grandchester, on the western edge of the Ipswich City Council region, about 3 years ago. A neighbour alerted me to its presence in our locality. Although I have seen photographs of the plant previously, I did not identify it initially. Only after seeing fireweed close up could I recognise its leaf and stem structure and its daisy flower with thirteen petals.

I was aware that it had been a problem in New South Wales and I mistakenly thought that it was confined to that state. It has taken some time to gain an understanding of the nature of the fireweed plant, its growth patterns and its ability to spread rapidly. This understanding has been achieved through discussions with other landholders, experience over time and internet searches. Fireweed is evident on road and rail corridors in the district and neighbouring districts.



Fireweed on the Brisbane Valley Rail Trail between Fernvale and Coominya – 22 August  
2016 (1 of 2 photographs)



Fireweed on the Brisbane Valley Rail Trail between Fernvale and Coominya – 22 August  
2016 (2 of 2 photographs)

The fireweed control plan that I have developed for my property allows for variance in weather conditions and I conduct thorough searches for new or rejuvenated plants in a period of 2-5 weeks after rain. The weed control mantra of *follow up, follow up, follow up* is at the core of my weed control plan. Generally, I favour physical removal. However, for expediency sometimes I use herbicide combined with a wetting agent on new, small seedlings.

I pull out, and bag in plastic bags, any fireweed that is mature. I take the added precaution of placing these bags of fireweed inside larger bags so as to avert the possible escape of any seed which might be present. The bagged fireweed is placed in full sunlight for two weeks before it is incinerated.



Fireweed – bagged on my property at Grandchester – 8 November 2016 (1 photograph)

Other weeds are much easier to control because it is easier to anticipate where they might grow and generally they are taller and have larger leaves e.g. Noogoora burr generally appears in alluvial soils and Spear/Scotch thistle and Wild Cotton like more fertile soils.

In contrast fireweed is a smallish plant and it blends in well with surrounding pasture. It will grow almost anywhere. It becomes easier to sight when it flowers. Experience has taught me that if it flowers, the battle to control it is much more difficult. I endeavour to attend to it before it flowers. I also prefer to physically remove the plant if it is practicable to do so because it contains an alkaloid which is harmful to cattle and horses.

#### **Biosecurity and Commercial Impact –**

**Potential harm to cattle** - It is understood that dead fireweed still contains the harmful alkaloid. The dead plant is said to be more palatable for livestock than a live plant, so it is preferable to physically remove the plant from the pasture.

Because I favour physical removal of fireweed and because it is difficult to see it before it flowers, I walk every square metre of my property. It takes several days to complete one pass depending on how much fireweed needs to be pulled and bagged. I do this physical removal task three times each year. I stock my property well below its potential cattle carrying capacity. This ensures that fireweed gets plenty of competition from existing pasture. Although my approach of physical removal takes an inordinate amount of time and effort, I am encouraged by the results.

**Hay and fodder** – I find it necessary from time to time to purchase baled hay produced on other properties. Care must be taken to source hay from sources free of fireweed; however, I anticipate that this will become increasingly difficult as fireweed spreads. As mentioned previously, it is understood that the alkaloid in fireweed is more palatable to livestock after it has dried, so feeding hay containing fireweed to cattle could lead to harm to the cattle.

I have not heard of any cattle deaths attributed to fireweed to date. However, the Queensland government 'Fact Sheet' indicates that fireweed can cause illness, slow growth and poor conditioning of cattle. I am informed by experienced producers that cattle usually avoid fireweed. However, in situations where available pasture is exhausted, cattle may then eat fireweed.

**Potential harm to humans** - Fireweed contains an alkaloid which may be harmful to humans. Some sources state that the alkaloid present in fireweed may cause irreversible liver damage. The Queensland government 'Fact Sheet' does not mention the need to wear gloves when handling fireweed.

[https://www.daf.qld.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/67167/IPA-Fireweed-PP31.pdf](https://www.daf.qld.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0009/67167/IPA-Fireweed-PP31.pdf)

A local community newspaper "Moreton Border News" dated 30 September 2016 contains an article about an initiative by the Ipswich City Council to enable the dumping of bagged fireweed without the normal charge at council refuse stations. Whilst the initiative is welcomed, the photographs show Councillors, David Pahlke and David Morrison, touching a fireweed plant without gloves. There is possibly no danger if a person simply touches the plant infrequently. However, if a person is, on a regular basis, gripping the plant to pull it out of the ground, the stem, leaves and flower invariably crush releasing a small amount of plant moisture onto the person's hands. I heeded a neighbour's advice to "glove up" when pulling fireweed.

A risk assessment is required to determine whether the Fact Sheet or other advisory material should contain information about appropriate personal protective equipment when handling fireweed.

# moreton border news



Camel milk: the latest beauty and health requirement -  story page 9

• Our 18th Year of Publication

Friday, September 30, 2016

## Fees waived to fight fireweed



**CR. David Pahlke**  
Division 10 Community Office – Ipswich City Council

  
**Ipswich**  
20 John Street  
PO Box 93, Rosewood 4340  
Mon-Frid 8.30a-12N 12.30p-3.30p  
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MOB 0419 705 376  
Dpahlke@ipswich.qld.gov.au  
Check out news for your area  
www.division10news.blogspot.com

Follow me on –  
<https://twitter.com/crdavidpahlke>  
FACEBOOK SITE: Cr David Pahlke

**Community comes first**

↓ ↓ ↓  
**NHW**  
(Neighbourhood Watch)  
AGM Harrisville  
-7.30pm  
- Wed, Oct 5



Cr Pahlke shows city based councillor David Morrison what fireweed looks like.

story page 3

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**Herbicides** - many landholders find it necessary to use increasing amounts of various herbicides, pesticides and veterinary chemicals depending on their land use. Fireweed control further increases the use of herbicides and, despite careful handling and the use of personal protective equipment, there is a residual risk of harm to people through the increased handling and use of herbicides. I find that certain broadleaf herbicides mixed with a wetting agent are giving me reasonable results.

**Cost** – The cost of herbicide, the cost of spraying equipment, the cost of labour and the loss of production have a significant effect on the bottom line of any operation. Fireweed control is labour intensive and this takes a substantial amount of time away from competing priorities.

**Incentive / Motivation** – Private landholders, departments responsible for government land and local government need to synchronise efforts to control fireweed. Government organisations and their officials are not exposed any to monetary or economic risk if fireweed continues to spread. In contrast, farmers will be affected financially by the spread of fireweed and are required to spend considerable amounts of time spraying fireweed and pulling fireweed.

It is my perception that there is no consistent or harmonious approach in the community because some landholders and some councils are enthusiastic about control and some are not. Some landholders are unable to control weeds because of ill health or restricted mobility. If landholders do not voluntarily control fireweed or they are not forced to control fireweed through regulatory intervention, it will continue to spread unchecked. This spread will include government owned land such as road and rail corridors and will result in an increased budgetary burden for government.



Fireweed on road corridors at Yamanto - 22 July 2016 (1 of 5 photographs)





Fireweed on road corridors at Yamanto - 22 July 2016 (2 of 5 photographs)



Fireweed on road corridors at Yamanto - 22 July 2016 (3 of 5 photographs)



Fireweed on road corridors at Yamanto - 22 July 2016 (4 of 5 photographs)



Fireweed on road corridors at Yamanto - 22 July 2016 (5 of 5 photographs)

**Government and governance** - It is understood that the Queensland government provides some funding to local government for pest management; however, there is no readily available information on how this is intended to operate. There is no transparency, accountability, efficiency, effectiveness and consistency with respect to the administration activities to counteract weed invasion or to regulate landholders' legislated obligations with respect to weeds.

Regional Councils (Lockyer and Somerset) as distinct from City Councils (Ipswich and Logan) are far more vigorous in their approach to weed control.

- The Lockyer Valley Regional Council Pest Management Plan, published on their website, outlines a comprehensive approach and the council works with the community in highlighting the fireweed issue.

- Somerset Regional Council appear to be more active as they have signage alerting the community about fireweed and encourage the reporting of fireweed sightings.



Somerset Shire Council are to be commended for their Fireweed sign on the Brisbane Valley Highway at Wanora. (1 photograph)

- Logan City Council Pest Management Plan, published on their website, quote "Fireweed\* Low Class 2 # Abundant and Widespread #Advice given to residents on treatment methods #Treatment of dence\* (sic) infestations on Council controlled land "Fireweed - a class 2 declared pest plant - is well established in Logan and has a low control priority status."
- The Ipswich City Council has a Pest Management Plan, not published on their website but available on request, which looks good. There is no readily available evidence that it is effectively implemented. Fireweed is spreading rapidly in the Ipswich City Council region. I have met with Councillors from the Ipswich City Council. Councillor Pahlke was very empathetic.

The Logan City Council Pest Management Plan indicates that fireweed "is well established in Logan and has a low control priority status". Whereas the control of pests including fireweed, according to the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries Principles of Pest Management "requires shared responsibility, capability, capacity and a long-term commitment by land owners/managers, the community, industry groups and government". I agree. The Logan City Council is not sharing responsibility and is not showing

long-term commitment. In my opinion, they are letting everyone else down. Fireweed is out of control particularly around Bethania which is a sea of yellow when fireweed is in flower.



Fireweed Logan City Council region - 7 September 2015 (1 of 4 photographs)



Fireweed Logan City Council region - 7 September 2015 (2 of 4 photographs)



Fireweed Logan City Council region - 7 September 2015 (3 of 4 photographs)





Fireweed Logan City Council region - 7 September 2015 (4 of 4 photographs)

**Weeds of National Significance** - Fireweed is one of thirty-two of Weeds of National Significance (WoNS). Refer to

<http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/invasive/weeds/weeds/lists/wons.html>

The following is an excerpt from the Commonwealth Department of the Environment and Energy's website:

"Thirty-Two Weeds of National Significance (WoNS) have been agreed by Australian governments based on an assessment process that prioritised these weeds based on their invasiveness, potential for spread and environmental, social and economic impacts. Consideration was also given to their ability to be successfully managed."  
"Landowners and land managers at all levels are responsible for managing WoNS. State and territory governments are responsible for legislation, regulation and administration of weeds. The WoNS were selected as they require coordination among all levels of government, organisations and individuals with weed management responsibilities."

Against this background, it is difficult to understand the Logan City Council's position on fireweed.

**Regulatory Intervention** - Prior to 1995, when the Moreton Shire was merged with the Ipswich City Council, my property was inspected regularly by council weed inspectors. If they found weeds they would issue a notice. The inspections helped maintain a focus on weed control. In my opinion, some form of regulatory intervention is again required.

Professional regulators should be able to develop an approach that will produce positive results. The Ipswich City Council recent initiative of waiving the dumping fees on bagged fireweed is a nice gesture but it is not enough.

Time has possibly moved on from the days of the Moreton Shire Council weed inspector but more efficacious and professional enforcement and compliance strategies could be deployed. Perhaps the Queensland government could perform audits of the effectiveness of each local government's Pest (weeds) Management Plan and financially reward or penalise performance accordingly. Doing nothing is not an option.

**Ombudsman** - There is only so much that Agriculture and Environment Committee's 'Inquiry into the impacts of invasive plants and their control' can reasonably cover. Given that there appears to be an absence of transparency, accountability, effectiveness or consistency in the administration and regulation of pest weeds, I recommend that the Committee considers referring these administrative failings to the Queensland Ombudsman. The Ombudsman has a commendable record of constructive reporting on the regulatory skills and systems being used by government regulators. Such a review would undoubtedly identify opportunities for improvement.

**Government initiatives** - Government initiatives, announced publicly, create a spark of hope that something good might happen but such announcements often do not lead to improvement for those directly affected. It has been 10 years since the now defunct Service Delivery and Performance Commission conducted a review of pest management which detailed overlap and duplication between three departments. The new biosecurity legislation came into effect in 2016 with some fanfare. As a landholder, I read such reports and announcements with hope and interest; however, with respect to weed pests, I find it difficult to identify any tangible, resultant progress in 'service delivery' in my locality.

**Public awareness** – The Department of Agriculture and Fisheries Principles of Pest Management states that "Public awareness and knowledge of weed and pest animal must be raised to increase the capacity and willingness of individuals to participate in control". I fully agree; however, I know of only one awareness raising initiative in my locality and that was a recent fireweed seminar in Rosewood. I have never received any publicity material from the department or from the Ipswich City Council regarding fireweed.

I have been unable to eradicate fireweed on my 50-hectare property. However, I have found that by increasing my understanding of fireweed and its growing cycle I have been able to develop a reasonably effective control program. I wish that I had known more about fireweed much earlier. I obtained information from discussions with neighbours and searching the internet. I receive four rates notices per year from the Ipswich City Council and although they use the rates envelope to include a variety of information, at this time they have never used it to convey information about fireweed.

**Government Owned Corporations** such as Powerlink and Energex operate across numerous local government areas. Powerlink and Energex have sound policies at the corporate level but implementation with their workforce and contractors is deficient as evidenced by discussions which I have had with workers on the easements on my property. Many of their

people working in the field have a low level of awareness of weed types and vehicle wash down. Vehicles and machinery used in the Logan area where fireweed “abundant and widespread” could also be used in areas that are currently fireweed free.

**Societal and demographic change** – With the decline in farm incomes for many small farms over the past 30 to 40 years much land is no longer occupied by farmers. Many rural landholders in South East Queensland are lifestyle land occupants side by side with people whose income and expenses are affected by fireweed. The income of a lifestyle landholder is derived from a source not dependant on their land. Weed invasion is less likely to affect them economically or financially. Lifestyle landholders may travel lengthy distances to work and in some months, will rarely see their properties in daylight. In order to motivate all landholders to address fireweed control, regulatory intervention and enforcement measures are essential.

**Founding Principles** – The fundamentals are in place:

- New legislation – Biosecurity Act 2014, Biosecurity Regulation 2016
- Principles - The Eight Principles of Pest Management Queensland weed and pest animal
- Strategy - Queensland Weed and Pest Animal Strategy, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, 2016
- Weeds of National Significance - The WoNS national management strategies have been agreed by the Commonwealth and all states

The ground work is done but what is the point without delivery?

**Implementation** - The Queensland Weed and Pest Animal Strategy, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, 2016 – 2020 reveals that a review of the strategies was completed in 2008. One of the findings of the review revealed that “There were limited responsibilities for any organisation to promote and ‘drive’ the implementation of the strategies”.

<https://publications.qld.gov.au/dataset/9ab3a726-2494-46d5-85ab-f38b3f8dac57/resource/c822cd60-6254-4e4a-b4c7-c392c3718427/download/qldweedandpeststrategy.pdf>

The traditional departmental structure has, according to the 2008 report, not succeeded in driving implementation of strategies. Implementation will never occur if there are “limited responsibilities for any organisation to promote and ‘drive’ the implementation of the strategies” – an eight-year-old self-admission that, under the existing organisational arrangement, the system is not working. The Department of Agriculture and Fisheries knew as far back as 2008 that the system was not working but it has failed to correct things. The lack of action and the lack of accountability confounds me.

**A call to action** - Continuing to fail to implement is not an option. The lack of action unfairly affects people who are doing the right thing by putting in the effort to control weeds. Currently too many land holders and local governments do little or nothing. This results in copious quantities of seed blown about by wind or sitting on the ground and remaining viable thus ensuring that the weed problem worsens and intensifies. While Queensland does nothing, neglected landholdings are turning into massive seedbanks which will ensure

that the weed problem worsens for years to come. The old saying '*one year's seeds, seven year's weeds*' still applies.

There must be a firm determination by the Queensland government to implement and enforce the legislation, to implement strategy, to ensure the eight principles are followed and to honour the national WoNS undertaking. I have no doubt that the implementation tasks will be extremely challenging, especially overcoming years of inertia. A new fresh structure and culture committed to driving implementation is required and it must have sufficient persuasive skills and coercive authority to make it happen.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission.