



Our ref: 5327076

16 January 2017

Research Director
Agriculture and Environment Committee
Parliament House
Brisbane, QLD, 4000
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To whom it may concern

Re: Inquiry into the impacts of invasive plants (weeds) and their control in Queensland

We welcome the opportunity to provide comment on the inquiry. As an organisation representing 12 local governments in Far North Queensland it is important we provide comment on matters which have direct or indirect influence on councils.

Our submission provides an overview of a local government perspective of the impacts of invasive weeds and their control and makes comment on points of the inquiry terms of reference which are most pertinent to the region. In preparing this response we are cognisant that this topic is as expansive as it is complex and comments provided are by no means exhaustive. To that end we would welcome further opportunity to discuss the broader issue in more detail.

We note the definition for invasive plants (weeds) for the inquiry are species set out in Schedules 1 & 2 of the Biosecurity Act. Giant rats tail grass and fireweed are management priorities within the FNQ region; prickly Acacia is a relatively frequent incursion via cattle transport and roadsides but to date has not formed persistent infestations within the region. In our first response below we would like to draw attention to our concerns that the emphasis on scheduled weeds is not truly representative of the management priorities identified at a local and regional level.

Terms of reference comments:

The responsibilities of local governments in relation to the control of prohibited, restricted and invasive plants imposed under s.48 of the Biosecurity Act 2014 are reasonable, and local governments are meeting those obligations.

From the inception of the Biosecurity Act there has been concern raised by our member councils at the resource requirements and at times technical capacity required to implement the Biosecurity Act. This feedback is coming from management units within councils who were already stretched in terms of staff and expertise and who were adjusting to significant shifts in capacity and resources from a diverse range of external and internal drivers. Without going into detail these include shifts/erosion of external resources, natural disasters, council amalgamations/de-amalgamations and competing priorities within council; many of which have been devolved to local government.

Given the Biosecurity Act has only been enacted for just over six months we consider it too early to make comment on whether local government (or any parties for that matter) are meeting their



obligations. In reality, we are still unpacking the legislation and developing an understanding of what those obligations are relative to the repealed legislation.

Whilst we welcome the new legislation and are supportive of the premise of the risk-based approach adopted, we are concerned one of the key instruments for compliance, the general biosecurity obligation (GBO), can only be applied to *invasive biosecurity matter*. One of the overarching concepts of the new legislation as we understood it was to move away from a prescriptive list-based legislation to one which enabled more succinct local and regional determination of priorities. We were very supportive of this approach as we have worked for around a decade on promoting and developing tools within regional strategies to do just that.

DAF's communication material in this regard state "*Invasive biosecurity matter is defined to include only invasive plants and animals that are listed as prohibited and restricted matter in schedules 1 and 2 of the Act*". The instruction for the implementation of the GBO is phrased as "*Local government will only be able to enforce the GBO if the risk is related to invasive biosecurity matter*". What this does is in effect move from a prescriptive, list based legislation (Land Protection Act 2002) to a yet another list based legislation. Whilst the GBO is not the only instrument which can be used for implementation, it is potentially a very useful tool as it is consistent with the risk-based foundation of the Biosecurity Act. It also allows for parallels to be drawn with familiar concepts like workplace health and safety legislation when communicating with the landholders. The work-around for councils is to prescribe the action or obligation desired via local law which can be done but has two major shortcomings;

The first is that compliance with a local government's biosecurity plan needs be delivered through two separate pieces of legislation (*Biosecurity Act* and *Local Government Act*). It is worth noting that one of the key intentions of the Biosecurity Act was to fold multiple legislations into one to make implementation more straightforward. This has implications for Authorised Officers who may need to enter a place for an inspection under two Acts (technically they would need to do this as separate entries to the same property and explain to landholders the various conditions and obligations which apply under each and to which weeds or pests they apply).

The second is that landholders are faced with potentially confusing scenario that the GBO applies only to those weeds (pests) listed in restricted or prohibited schedules with a separate action, obligation or penalty for those identified under a local law. Whilst local governments have traditionally made good use of the flexibility provided by prescribing actions under local law, the process could potentially be more effective if the emphasis of what is a priority for management was generated by development and maintenance of the local governments Biosecurity Plan required by the Act; and that the legislation directly support a local/regional determination of priorities

The solution to this as we see it would be to allow for the GBO to apply to all weeds and pests identified in a local governments biosecurity plan regardless of whether they are listed under Biosecurity Act or local law.

The process of listing species in the new act is yet to be tested however we would like to highlight our past frustrations in this space as they demonstrate a disconnect between regional determination and state process. The Far North region regularly experiences incursions of novel weeds (not occurring elsewhere in Queensland or Australia). Biosecurity Plans across our member



councils are made up of up to 35% of weeds which are not listed in schedules of the Act- i.e. they are truly 'local' or 'regional' priorities for management. Our trepidation for the process of 'listing' new species is highlighted in past experience by *Stevia ovata*. Detected as naturalised in 2007, it became an immediate target for management. We made a regional deputation for its declaration in 2009. It was not until the enactment of the Biosecurity Act 2014 (in July 2016) that the species was scheduled. While the formal classification of a weed under legislation (schedules) should not be the only motivation for action from landholders and stakeholders, it can be an important motivator for agencies and businesses to respond. Clearly a new and emerging weed issue of significance would benefit from a classification process faster than the 9 or so years in this instance.

Programs for the control of weeds on Crown land administered by the Department of Natural Resources and Mines are effective

From a local government perspective our regional experience with DNRM land management is a positive one in both weeds and fire management. Given the scale of the estate managed by this group there is not the expectation in our experience that 'all' weeds will be managed in all locations. Where there is an identified management priority the team is a consistent contributor to management on the ground in neighbouring tenures and a regular and consistent contributor to advisory groups and strategic planning.

Biosecurity Queensland's weeds programs, including biological controls and new technologies, are adequately funded and effective at controlling weeds

We would like to highlight that we have no persistent criticism of the operations of Biosecurity Queensland in our region and would take the opportunity to express our appreciation for the support of our regional operatives and researchers whom we consider partners. It is clear however that the department as a whole is significantly under-resourced, particularly in the areas of engagement and research and is unlikely to recover from cuts of recent years unless a deliberate recourse is implemented. We had hoped this may be in-part addressed in the capability review process; but as yet no evidence of this is forthcoming. We are aware that there is a sentiment to deliver to the 'coalface' by delivering state resources to the landholder and community on certain issues which we are supportive of if they are strategic and effective; we are however concerned that this may be at the expense of, rather than complimentary to, investment in research and engagement capacity.

The simple reality is that it is unlikely that Queensland as a state can over-invest in biosecurity research capability, particularly if the scope of research investigates both traditional and new technologies and practices. We would simply arrive at solutions sooner. The perception prevalent in the restructuring of the department that researchers are not 'front-line' staff was and still is, in our opinion, erroneous and far from our experience. Stakeholders of this region have always enjoyed a high level of communication and collaboration with applied research staff with those communications often filling the gap left by the withdrawal of extension and field operatives.

We also wish to draw attention to the resourcing of biosecurity capability in Aboriginal Shire Councils (Yarrabah, Wujal Wujal and Hopevale are members of FNQROC so these comments are specific to them but may be relevant elsewhere). Aboriginal Shires have no revenue base or resource on which to develop and sustain operational programs and so they are reliant on funding allocation from State and Commonwealth governments. A long standing issue for our member councils has been that whilst funding is allocated to the Animal Management Worker (AMW)



program (as a partnership between Queensland Health and Biosecurity Queensland) most, if not all, is quarantined solely to animal management work with little if any available to address biosecurity issues. In some communities biosecurity operations are delivered in part or wholly by ranger programs. Such programs are usually external to council and as such are not accountable to deliver works within the settled areas of a community as a council works team would be. Landscape management teams (mower gangs) may manage some biosecurity issues as well, but not in a targeted way. As a result there is a clear capacity and delivery gap in biosecurity operations within these communities. This has implications not only for the immediate community, but also restricts council's capacity to work in with neighbouring shires and the region as whole on strategic programs.

The nature of animal management issues in communities dictates that this is essential work and should not be compromised or diluted. Ranger and Working On Country programs have some overlap with, and do work in a biosecurity context; however this is not their primary purpose. It would seem timely with the introduction of the Biosecurity Act that the capacity for the delivery of biosecurity programs in Aboriginal Shire Councils needs to be assessed and funding shortfalls addressed. This is a programmatic matter that should be led by the state in partnership with councils.

Federal, state and local government weeds programs are coordinated to maximise their achievements and to have a whole of government approach.

Whole of government coordination across biosecurity appears to be gaining traction in a planning context with more universal planning processes in place, particularly in the pre-border and immediate post border space. This is evidenced by moves by both levels of government to a more universal 'biosecurity' concepts in legislation and strategy. However there are several fundamental issues which continue to hinder realising this at an operational and delivery level, particularly for 'non-emergency' management targets. Some elements of this are -

Displacement and removal of external resources for weed management. There is a decade-long legacy of defunding core national weed initiatives as exemplified by the disbanding or cuts to the National WoNS Program, Caring For Our Country, Biodiversity Fund, Landcare and the Weeds CRC. Elements of these programs have been recaptured in 'green' employment programs such as Green Army and 20 Million Trees which programmatically have more emphasis on social outcomes rather than delivery of NRM outcomes. The retraction of external state and commonwealth resources is one of the key drivers for the reduction in local government management capacity in this region. To our knowledge the actual impacts on national coordination of the cessation of initiatives such as WoNS (coordinators and committees) and the Weeds CRC have never been formally evaluated.

Management programs are funded in sync with political cycle's not biological targets. One to three year funding programs very rarely address weed management issues in a sustainable way. It is consistently raised by land managers that continuity in resources on timelines commensurate to biological timeline of the management task is more desirable than large injections of funds with short delivery timeframes. This has a flow-on effect of engaging and disengaging landholders in stop-start projects which have little chance at succeeding.

Alternative avenues for funding of weed management programs are not being developed. Acknowledgement that weeds management is a perpetual and never ending task is an essential



realisation that has not yet carried through to funding models. The withdrawal of Commonwealth and State funding has resulted in devolution to landholders and local governments because they are compelled to respond. Alternative approaches which do not require considerable financial input are actively being sought out of necessity (do more with less). However the reality is that at some point in time all projects require capital to continue. In line with the previous comment a mechanism whereby a reliable 'trickle' of resources can be delivered over a sustained period is likely to be more effective and less reactive than boom and bust funding. Seeking resourcing solutions within constraints of the current funding approaches is clearly not delivering; perhaps we should be looking elsewhere for solutions.

In conclusion we wish to highlight the importance of supporting local governments in their role in the delivery of biosecurity outcomes. They are often the first point of contact for community and through the biosecurity planning process are well placed to articulate the concerns and management priorities specific to their region. To that end we would welcome any further conversations in finding more sustainable solutions to resourcing weed management programs; and would encourage a more detailed evaluation of impacts on local communities of defunding biosecurity research and coordination at a state and national level.

For any queries specific to this submission please contact Travis Sydes, Regional Coordinator Natural Assets and Sustainability [REDACTED]

We look forward to the findings of this inquiry

Yours sincerely

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