

# report

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# Murrumbidgee Wetland Seedbank Research Project

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# Murrumbidgee Wetland Seedbank Research Project Preliminary Report

By Emma Clifton

February 2004

# Part of:

Land & Water Project No. NDW32 Improving the management of wetlands on the Murrumbidgee River floodplain

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#### **Summary**

The majority of wetlands along the Murrumbidgee are owned privately, yet little is known about these wetlands and there is evidence they are in poor ecological condition (Spencer *et. al.* 1998). This project was aimed at discovering the nature of the plant communities within wetlands on private land on the Murrumbidgee River. At the commencement of the project the region was in the midst of a drought, meaning vegetation surveys would not have been fruitful. A soil seedbank study was conducted instead. Wetlands with different commence to fill levels, profiles (shallow and deep) and managements were studied to discover how these factors would influence the species present. Species distribution was also compared between wetlands, within wetlands and within treatments.

Soil was collected from low and high water mark, and paddock plots within 11 wetlands along the Murrumbidgee River between Gundagai and just downstream of Hay. It was propagated in either moist or submerged treatments. Species and their quantities were recorded over a 6-week period.

In total 67 species were recorded however only 49% have been identified. Of those identified down to genus level 78% were native. Half were potential weed species, however most of these were minor native agricultural weeds. There was a greater diversity of species in shallow wetlands compared to deep wetlands. Most species were found in moist treatment compared to submerged treatments. Further data analysis that has yet to be completed.

#### Introduction

Wetlands have a great diversity of values, which vary significantly between different groups and individuals. These include their role as functioning ecosystems performing functions such as nutrient trapping and water cleansing and providing habitat for important native flora and fauna. Whitten and Bennett (2000) surveyed landholders in the Murrumbidgee catchment concerning their opinions on wetlands on their properties. It was found that over 90% of farmers grazed their wetlands and 83% had varied their wetlands water regime. Furthermore 37% of farmers considered wetlands to be a major weed source, with a further 40% considering it to be a minor problem. So of all the farmers surveyed the majority saw weeds as a problem in the management of wetlands.

Considering the drought conditions at the commencement of the project in early 2003 a vegetation survey to determine species distribution within and between wetlands would not have been practical. It was decided that an assessment of the seedbank within the soil could serve the same purpose as a vegetation survey. Determining the seedbank through propagation of the soil has previously been used to determine the potential species present in a wetland (Brock *et. al.* 1993).

There has been very little research conducted into the health and effective management of wetlands on private land along the Murrumbidgee River. Spencer *et. al.* (1998) found that wetlands along the Murrumbidgee between Gundagai and Hay were generally in poor condition. Jansen and Robertson (2001) found that the condition of the riparian habitat significantly declined with an increase in grazing.

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#### Aim

The aim of the experiment was to conduct a pilot study to examine the plant species present within the Murrumbidgee River floodplain wetlands. Wetlands were chosen with different:

- Flood level to inundation
- Management (grazing, cropping, fenced or unfenced); and
- Profiles (ie shallow or deep)

As these are known to influence the species present.

Species distribution can vary with scale and this was examined:

- Between wetlands
- Within the wetland site; and
- Within inundation treatment

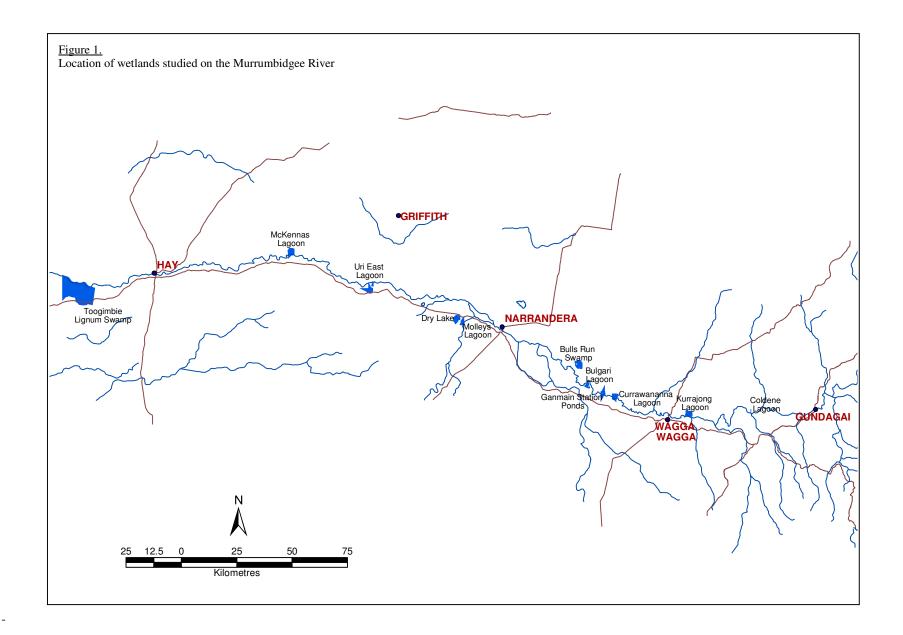
Of particular interest was how many environmental and agricultural weed species were present in the wetlands, both native and introduced.

#### **Methods**

#### Study Area

The Murrumbidgee River is located within the Murray-Darling Basin in southern New South Wales. It is the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest river in the basin. It is a highly regulated river, with two major reservoirs in its upper catchment and numerous other dams and weirs within the catchment which support extensive irrigation industries downstream.

11 wetlands were studied along the Murrumbidgee River, on private land, between Gundagai and just downstream of Hay (Figure 1, Appendix 1)



<u>Table 1</u> - Summary of the management, commence to fill level and profile type of each wetland.

Profile: deep = >1 to 3 m deep; shallow = less than or equal to 1 m (Paterson *et al*, 2002)

Wetland Name	Wetland grazed	Regeneration	Commence to fill (ML/day) and gauge location	Profile (shallow/deep)
Bulgari Lagoon	Yes	River Red Gum	58,000 Wagga Wagga	deep
Bulls Run Swamp	Yes	River Red Gum	61,000 Wagga Wagga	shallow
Coldene Lagoon	Yes	River Red Gum	29,000 Gundagai	deep
Currawanna Lagoon	Yes	River Red Gum		deep
Dry Lake	Yes	River Red Gum	23,000 Narrandera	shallow
Ganmain Station	Yes	River Red Gum	31,000 Wagga Wagga	deep
Kurrajong	Yes	River Red Gum	43,000 Wagga Wagga	deep
McKennas Lagoon	No - since 1996	River Red Gum & Black Box		shallow
Molleys Lagoon	Yes	River Red Gum & Black Box	23,000 Narrandera	deep
Toogambie	Yes	Lignum	30,000 Hay	shallow
Uri East	Yes	River Red Gum & Black Box	21,017 Darlington Point	shallow

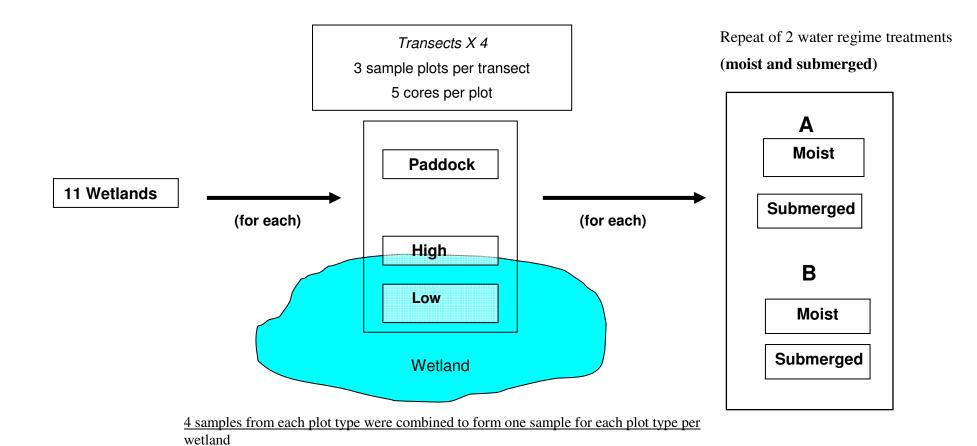
#### Criteria for selection of wetlands

Eleven wetlands were selected from the Mid-Murrumbidgee River Floodplain based on their:

- commence to fill levels based on river heights at the closest river gauge
- known grazing history (grazed and not currently grazed)
- shallow ( $\leq$  1m deep) or deep (> 1m deep) profile based on Parkinson et al (2002)
- location on private land.

The landholders consent to access and study the wetlands was also vital in the selection of wetlands.

Figure 2 – Sampling and Experimental Design



(11 wetlands X 3 plot samples per wetland X 2 treatments x 2 repeats) + 4 controls = 132 pots

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#### Collection of soil from wetlands

Soil was collected from the 11 wetlands. At each wetland four transects, at least 50m apart, were set up. They extended 20m into the surrounding paddocks and to the deepest part of the wetland. Along each transect three 4m² plots (2 x 2m) were set up, one each representing the paddock (located 20m from the wetland edge), high water mark (littoral zone) and low point of the wetland (deepest point within the wetland). Five random core samples were taken from each plot using a PVC (diameter 55mm, height 30mm) pipe with a sharpened end. The random core samples from the four transect were combined according to plot type (paddock, high and low) to form a mixed sample. These combined plot samples were stored in a plastic bucket with a tight fitting lid and transported back to the laboratory. The soil from each bucket was air dried separately by spreading out on a tray and allowing to dry at the ambient temperature. Once dry the soil was stored in cloth bags for 4 months until the commencement of the experiment.

#### Soils

EC, pH and soil texture tests were carried out on all the soil samples prior to propagation. Soil pH was determined on a 1-5 solution using an ion specific pH meter. Electrical conductivity (EC) was determines on a 1-5 solution using a Radiometer Mark 1 conductivity meter with a specific ion meter for EC. Field texture tests were determined on the combined soil samples.

#### Propagation of soils

The propagation trial lasted 6 weeks from wetting of the soil to counting and removal of species.

The dry soil samples were mixed well and divided into 5 parts by weight. One part was set aside as a spare sample and the other four were bagged and labelled ready for wetting. The four samples from each soil bag were subject to two different water treatments; moist and submerged. The submerged soils were kept totally submerged for the duration of the experiment. The moist soils had the bases of their containers sitting in 1-2cm of water. Figure 2 sets out the sampling and experimental design of the project.

The divided soils were placed in 2L ice-cream containers with holes drilled in the bottom. The containers were half-filled with a 50% washed sand (<2mm) and 50% vermiculite mixture on which the soil was placed on top. The sand was treated in an autoclave at 120°C for 2 hours to destroy the seeds present. Four moist controls were filled with the sand/vermiculite mixture only. Each pair of water regimes (A or B) was placed in Styrofoam coolers. Submerged treatments were placed on the bottom of the cooler, while the moist was raised above the bottom using an inverted ice-cream container. A newspaper wick was used to ensure the moist treatment never became dry. One end of the wick was placed between the inverted ice-cream container and the bottom of the 'moist' treatment container, while the other end dangled into the water. The boxes were filled so the water just covered the base of the moist container, while the submerged was covered by approximately 2cm of water (Figure 2) The coolers were

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randomly placed on the ground. Some of the coolers did not receive full sun until midday due to their positioning. All the coolers were rotated once weekly so the samples were not being compromised by environmental effects such as shading. The boxes were rotated once weekly so each box was not in a shaded position for more than one out of three weeks. Water in the boxes was topped up daily and changed once weekly to prevent the built-up of algae. Daily maximum and minimum water temperatures were recorded.

### Counting and harvesting species

The number of species present was recorded each week. The first two weeks the species were noted as Monocotyledon or Dicotyledon. From the  $3^{rd}$  week onwards species were given code names and were tracked using coloured pins and matchsticks. Species were named either Monocot n, Dicot n, Milfoil n or the species common name if it could be identified. Photos were taken of all the species at different growth stages. Plants were removed if they were getting too big for their containers. All plants beyond cotyledon stage were either potted-up as representative specimens or discarded after counting. All the containers containing the soil were placed on benches in a shade house to observe any germination of new species.

## Identifying plant species

Species were identified using literature such as Flora of New South Wales (1990) and Plants of Western New South Wales (1992). Assistance was also obtained from the Gillis Horner, a botanist at the Centre for Natural Resources, Wagga Wagga. Many photos at the macro and micro scales were taken for future reference and identification of seedling plant species.

#### **Results**

#### Soils

The EC ranges from 11 to 625  $\mu$ m/cm, with an average of 152  $\mu$ m/cm, which is well below saline. pH ranges from 5.25 to 6.69, the average being 6. These are normal results for wetland soils. The textures vary considerable, however it is difficult to determine how this could effect plant germination (Appendix 2).

#### **Species**

So far a total of 67 species have been recorded, 33 (49%) of which have been identified to at least genus level. Of these identified species 78% were native, 50% were weeds or potential

agricultural weeds and 18% (6) were introduced weeds. Appendix 3 outlines all the species found and their code names prior to being positively identified.

#### Diversity of species within wetlands including prolific species.

Table 4 compares wetland type (shallow or deep), management (grazed or ungrazed), prolific species and weed species present. Prolific species were those where more than 10 plants were recorded from the soil from that wetland.

Both of the wetlands, which currently experience no grazing, have a high number of species present. Grazed wetlands have both high and low numbers of species present. All wetlands contained potential weed species, although not all wetlands contained introduced weed species such as Bathurst Burr and Thistle species.

### Species found in shallow and deep wetlands

Most species were found in both shallow and deep wetlands, however shallow wetlands contained more species overall compared to deep wetlands.

Table 2 – Distribution of species between shallow and deep wetlands

	Shallow only	Deep only	Both
Number of	22(33%)	15(22%)	30 (45%)
Species			

# Species in submerged and moist

Ten species (15%) occurred only in submerged, while 49 species (73%) occurred only in the moist. Eight species (12%) occurred in both most and submerged treatments.

Slightly more species were found in the moist treatment occurred in the paddock and high plots compared to the low plots. Species that preferred submerged conditions were far more likely to be found in high and low plots.

<u>Table 3</u> – Distribution of species in moist and submerged treatments of the paddock, high and low plots

	Both	Submerged	Moist
Paddock	2	2	30
High	9	9	31
Low	9	6	26

<u>Table 4</u> – Comparison of wetland profile, management, number of species, prolific species and potential weed species

Wetland	Profile	Wetland Grazed?	Number of Species Present	Prolific Species	Potential weed species
Bulgari Lagoon	deep	yes	15	Hairy Carpet Weed, Red water milfoil	Bathurst Burr, Dirty Dora, Toad Rush, Red Water Milfoil, Dock, Small Crumb Weed,
Bulls Run Swamp	shallow	yes	17	Spike Rush, Fine Spike Rush, Waterwort, Milfoil 1	Dirty Dora, Toad Rush
Coldene Lagoon	deep	yes	13	Monocot 1, Dirty Dora, Hairy Persicaria, Small knotweed, small crumb weed	Thistle, Paterson's Curse, Bathurst Burr, Dirty Dora, Hairy Knotweed, Small Knotweed, Small Crumb Weed.
Currawanna Lagoon	deep	yes	7	0	Dirty Dora, Hairy Knotweed, Small Crumb Weed.
Dry Lake	shallow	yes	12	Monocot 3, Common Sneezeweed, Waterwort	Dirty Dora, Red Water Milfoil, Lesser Joy Weed
Ganmain Station Ponds	deep	yes	17	Rye grass B – Droopy love grass?	Small Knotweed, Small Crumb Weed, Lesser Joyweed, Dock
Kurrajong Lagoon	deep	yes	13	Rye grass B, Spike rush, Common, Sneezeweed, Dicot 2	Paterson's curse, Hairy Knotweed, Lesser Joyweed
McKennas Lagoon	shallow	no - none since 1996	19	Couch, Spike Rush, Fine Spike Rush, Milfoil 1, Daisy – Bindi-eye? Sneezeweed, Dicot 2, Small Knotweed, Small Crumb Weed.	Dirty Dora, Small Knotweed, Small Crumbweed, Lesser Joyweed
Molleys Lagoon	deep	no – stopped recently	20	Ryegrass B, Running Spikerush, Spikerush, Common Sneezeweed, Dicot 25	Dirty Dora, Small Crumbweed, Dock
Toogambie	shallow	yes	19	Ryegrass B, Running Spikerush, Spikerush, Dicot 10, Dicot 18,	Thistle, Dirty Dora, Lesser Joyweed
Uri East	shallow	yes	15	Dicot 23 – Hairy carpet weed, Spikerush, Fine Spikerush.	Dirty Dora, Small Crumbweed, Lesser Joyweed, Raspwort

#### Weed and potential weed species

The main environmental and agricultural weed species identified were Patterson's Curse, Bathurst Burr, a thistle species and Dirty Dora. Dirty Dora was the most widespread introduced weed. The rest of the introduced weed species were not common.

Minor Agricultural weeds such as Small Crumbweed and Hairy Knotweed were also prolific and found in many wetlands.

Red Water Milfoil, a major weed in irrigation channels, was abundant in a few wetlands

<u>Table 5</u> - Native and introduced weed and potential weed species that have been identified to date.

Native weed species	Introduced Weed Species
Toad Rush	Bathurst Burr
Red Water Milfoil	Dirty Dora
Small Crumbweed	Dock
Hairy Knotweed	Patterson's Curse
Small Knotweed	Thistle
Lesser Joyweed	
Raspwort	

#### **Conclusions**

This study suggests that shallow wetlands support a greater diversity of species (52), compared to deep wetlands (45). However, analysis has not yet been carried out on the composition of these different species groups.

Each type of wetland supports unique species. Most species were found in one or two wetlands only. Only a few species were prolific across most wetlands.

This study suggests that moist conditions are more favourable for the majority of species (85%).

The majority of submerged species occurred in the high and low plot sample within the wetlands. This was to be expected, as it was unlikely that submerged plants would distribute seeds into the surrounding paddocks.

Overall the majority of identified species were native (78%). This result is encouraging, perhaps suggesting many of the wetlands have the potential to establish healthy plant communities if given the right conditions.

Potential weed species made up a significant proportion of identified species (50%) although most of these were minor native agricultural weeds. There doesn't seem to be a large seed resource of many of the more serious agricultural and environmental weeds such as Thistle species, Paterson's Curse and Bathurst Burr, which is surprising especially in the paddock

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soils. Dirty Dora is the most prolific of all the introduced weed species, occurring in most of the wetlands in significant numbers.

Concern has to be raised about the lack of introduced weed species germinating in the trial, particularly in paddock plots when these species were found during soil collection(Pers. Comm. Patricia Murray, 2004). It may be that their seeds were not present in the seed bank, or if they were present then the experimental conditions were not right for there germination. The soil may have been kept too moist or they may be winter germinating species. More research needs to be conducted into the methods used in this experiment

This is a preliminary report because many issues need to be resolved. Firstly all the species need to be identified and further data analysis conduced on species distribution in moist and submerged treatments; within wetlands and; between wetlands. Distribution of species also needs to be compared with commencement to fill levels (frequency of inundation) and frequency of grazing.

# Acknowledgments

National River Consortium for providing the funding for the project; Patricia Murray for being a very patient and supportive supervisor; James Maguire for technical assistance and providing value information about the wetlands; Janet Wild for her assistance with soils; Gillis Horner for his willingness to share his vast knowledge of plants; Sandy Grant for helping produce the map and; staff at the Centre for Natural Resources for providing technical support and space to conduct the experiment.

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# Appendices

# Appendix 1. – Wetland location

Wetland	Мар	Grid Ref
Bulgari Lagoon	Berembed	968289
Bulls Run Swamp	Berembed	930384
Coldene Lagoon	Wantabadgery	640197
Currawanna Lagoon	Collingullie	093243
Dry Lake	Gogeldrie	375590
Ganmain Station Ponds	Collingullie	040253
Kurrajong Lagoon	Wagga Wagga	425165
McKennas Lagoon	Benerembah	630890
Molleys Lagoon	Gogeldrie	400573
Toogambie	Toogambie	7366
Uri East	Darlington Point	029715

# Appendix 2 – Soil pH, EC and texture test results

Wetland	Low/ High/ Paddock	pН	EC(μm/cm)	Texture
Bulgari Lagoon	L	6.69	216	Light sandy clay loam
	Н	6.17	95	Sandy clay loam
	P	5.92	180	Loam, fine sandy
Bulls Run Swamp	L	5.40	215	Loam, fine sandy
	Н	5.51	145	Silty clay
	P	6.11	115	Silty clay loam
Coldene Lagoon	L	6.05	625	Loam
	Н	6.43	95	Silty clay
	P	6.39	200	Silty clay loam
Currawanna Lagoon	L	5.45	170	Silty loam
	Н	6.35	55	Silty clay loam
	P	6.23	77	Silty clay
Dry Lake	L	6.06	92	Loam, sandy
	Н	5.69	95	Loam, sandy
	P	6.05	160	Silty clay loam
Ganmain Station	L	5.81	380	Loam
	Н	6.44	220	Silty Loam
	P	5.91	250	Medium clay
Kurrajong Lagoon	L	5.79	103	Loam, fine sandy
	Н	5.47	136	Loam fine sandy
	P	5.91	85	Silty clay loam
McKennas Lagoon	L	5.68	315	Silty clay loam
	Н	5.25	210	Loam
	P	6.64	140	Clayey loam
Molleys Lagoon	L	5.64	140	Fine sandy loam
	Н	6.22	37	Light clay
	P	6.02	145	Medium clay
Toogambie	L	6.45	85	Light clay
	Н	6.56	82	Light clay

Wetland	Low/	pН	EC(µm/cm)	Texture
	High/			
	Paddock			
	P	6.49	92	Clay loam
Uri East	L	5.70	135	Clay loam
	Н	6.25	65	Light clay
	P	5.95	135	Light clay
Sand		6.30	11	sand
Vermiculite		6.39	11.2	n/a

# <u>Appendix 3</u> – Species List

Species ID	Species Name	Weed Species?
Monocot 1	Couch?	Potential ecological and
		agricultural weed
Monocot 2	Potamogeton Sp.?	No
Monocot 3	Some Couch -	Potential ecological weed
	Sporobolus mitchelli?	(couch)
	and	
	Some Perennial Rye	
	Grass – Lolium perenne?	
Monocot 4		
Monocot 5	Dirty Dora – Cyperus	Agricultural weed – major
	difformis	rice weed.
Couch	Couch (Sporobolus	
	mitchelli?)	
Rye Grass	Some Juncus Bufonius or	Bufonius minor agricultural
-	Kookanus?	weed
	and	
	Some couch?	
Rye Grass B	Eragrostis Sp	no
	Drooping Love Grass?	
Spike rush	Pale Spike Rush –	no
	Eleocharis pallens	
Fine Spike	Small Spike Rush –	no
Rush	Eleocharis pusilla	
Running	Small Spike Rush –	no
Spike Rush	Eleocharis pusilla	
Big Spike	Tall Spike Rush -	no
Rush	Eleocharis sphacelata	
Juncus	Toad Rush -Juncus	bufonius minor agricultural
	bufonius	weed
Mud Grass	Windmill Grass –	Coloniser in disturbed areas
	Chloris truncata?	
Wild Oats	Some Hairy Panic –	no
	Panicum effusum?	
	and	
	Some Cupgrass –	
	Eriochoa Sp.?	
Medic 1	Tripholium Sp.?	potential ecological and
		agricultural
Medic 2		potential ecological and
		agricultural
Milfoil 1		
Milfoil 2	Red Water Milfoil –	Agricultural weed in farm
	Myriophyllum	dams and irrigation channels
	verrucosum	

Species ID	Species Name	Weed Species?
Milfoil 3		
Milfoil 4	Swamp Stonecrop -	
TARROTT 1	Crassula helmsii	
Milfoil 5	Crassita nemst	
Milfoil 6	Nitella (algae)	
	Bindy eye?	
Daisy Salt bush 1	Billdy eye:	
Salt bush 2	0 1	D ( ) 1E 1 1 1 1
Oxalis	Oxalis	Potential Ecological and
D 1 . D	D. d D	agricultural
Bathurst Burr	Bathurst Burr –	Serious ecological and
	Xanthium spinosum	agricultural weed.
Patterson's	Echium plantagineum	Serious ecological and
Curse		agricultural weed.
Thistle		Ecological and agricultural
		weed.
Nardoo		Minor agricultural weed in
		rice crops
Sneezeweed –	Common Sneezeweed –	No
Dicot 1	Centepedia	
	cunninghamii	
Dicot 2	Lesser Joyweed –	Minor pasture weed and
	Alternanthera	potential ecological weed in
	denticulata	wet places.
Dicot 3	Dock	Agricultural weed
Dicot 4	Speedwell – Veronica	no
	Sp.?	
Dicot 5	-F.:	
Dicot 6	Rumex Sp Dock	Agricultural weed
Dicot 7	Rumes sp. Book	7 Ignediturur weed
Dicot 8	Hairy knotweed –	Minor pasture weed, may
Dicot 6	Persicaria Sp.?	block irrigation channels
Dicot 9	1 ersicuriu sp.:	block infigation challiers
Dicot 9		
Dicot 11		
Dicot 12	Slender Carpet weed –	
D: 12	Glinus oppositifolia?	76
Dicot 13	Small knotweed –	Minor pasture weed, may
	Polygonum plebeium	block irrigation channels
Dicot 14	Same as 13?	
Dicot 16	Small Crumb Weed –	Minor agricultural weed
	Chenopodium pumilio	
Dicot 18		
Dicot 19		
Dicot 20	Saltbush	
Dicot 21	Bathurst Burr	Serious ecological and
		agricultural weed.
Dicot 22		
Dicot 23	Hairy Carpet Weed –	
	Glinis lotoides?	
Dicot 24	Died	
Dicot 25		
Dicot 26		
Dicot 27		+
Dicot 28	Waterwort – <i>Elatine</i>	no
DICOT 20	grantioloides?	110
Dicot 29	grannoioiaes:	
Dicot 30		

Species ID	Species Name	Weed Species?
Dicot 31		
Dicot 33		
Dicot 34		
Dicot 35		
Dicot 36	Tar Vine – <i>Boerhavia</i> diffusa	No
Dicot 37	ијјиза	
Dicot 40		
Dicot 41		
Dicot 42	Rough or Grey Raspwort  - Haloragis aspera or glauca	agricultural weed (cultivation)