

FLORA

WESTERN AUSTRALIA'S STATE WEED PLAN: A NEW STRATEGY IN THE WAR ON WEEDS

by Sandy Lloyd

WHY do we need a State Weed Plan?' you might ask yourself. Did you know that after habitat loss, such as clearing, environmental weeds are the biggest threat to biodiversity? Exactly how many weeds are there in Western Australia? A few dozen? A couple of hundred? There are over 1,300 weed species already known to be in WA, and plenty more trying to get in!

What is a weed? The National Weeds Strategy definition: 'a weed is a plant which has, or has the potential to have, a detrimental effect on economic, social or conservation values' was used in the State Weed Plan because it covered every angle.

To many Australians, weeds are merely a nuisance in the garden. But to those concerned with the preservation of native bushland, weeds are a menacing threat to native flora and fauna. Weeds also have a detrimental impact on human health and water resources. The effects of weeds may be direct, such as the loss of native species and agricultural production; or indirect, such as increased frequency of bushfires. Sometimes it is these less obvious indirect effects that have the greatest impact on biodiversity. An infestation of veld grass, for example, can lead to a cycle of hot summer fires seriously degrading native vegetation and decimating wildlife.

It is impossible to calculate the cost of weeds to the environment, biodiversity, heritage, tourism, and health. But ask any farmer about weeds, and he or she will quickly tell you what effect they have on the bank balance. The fact is, weeds cost Australian agriculture in excess of \$3.3 billion per annum. Many more dollars are spent removing weeds from waterways, national parks, roadsides, railway lines, footpaths, sporting grounds and so on. Who pays for this? We all do, whether through rates and taxes, reduced profitability of farming, or through our own hard work. Although large sums of money are poured into weed control every year, weeds seem to be exploding across Australia, and WA is no exception.

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Searching for skeleton weed. Photo: AGWEST.

Weeds continue to find new ways to spread. One of the new 'vectors' is the postal system, especially now that internet ordering is so popular. The WA Quarantine and Inspection Service (WAQIS) has installed a special scanner at the mail exchange to check parcels coming in from overseas – many banned seeds, bulbs, cuttings and so on are intercepted in this way.

While weeds degrade our natural resources, they may also be a symptom of degradation caused by other factors. For example, aquatic weeds proliferate in waterways with high nutrient levels. In this case the nutrient problem must be dealt with before the weed problem will be solved. Another problem arises where a plant may be of great benefit or highly desirable to one group of people, but a serious weed to others. Paterson's curse and tagasaste are good examples of this.

Complicated isn't it? That's why we need a State Weed Plan. Controlling weeds has traditionally been perceived to be the domain of farmers, shire councils, government agencies and organisations such as the Agriculture Protection Board. In fact, control of serious agricultural weeds (Declared Plants) has, for over 20 years, been the legal responsibility of all landholders. The same responsibility has not applied to environmental weeds. Some concerned groups of volunteers have been attempting to attack environmental weeds in bushland, but their efforts are often thwarted by irresponsible gardeners dumping plant rubbish. The new State Weed Plan (SWP) will attempt to engage the wider community in combating weeds. The formation of a new body, the

State Weed Coordinating Council (SWCC) has been recommended.

How was it written? A steering group comprised of representatives from AGWEST, the APB, the Environmental Weeds Action Network, Roadside Conservation Committee, Australian Association of Bush Regenerators, CALM, Conservation Council, Department of Environmental Protection, Nursery Industry Association, and others, engaged a consultant to write the plan. Public meetings to obtain comments and suggestions were held in Busselton, Fitzroy Crossing, Katanning, Kununurra, Moora and Perth. Submissions were also called for. The plan was to be released in the spring of 1999 for a period of public comment, however the task was greater than anticipated and the plan will now be released in early February. It will be circulated for about two months to get submissions from the public.

The plan will be circulated widely through AGWEST offices, other government agencies, councils, and community centres such as the Swan Catchment Centre. You can get a copy from the AGWEST publications section Tel. 9368 3729. The plan will also be available on the internet <www.agric.wa.gov.au/programs/app/swp>

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