

SUBMISSION

SENATE INQUIRY into ENVIRONMENTAL BIOSECURITY

Re: *The adequacy of arrangements to prevent entry and establishment of invasive species likely to harm Australia's natural environment.*

Summary: There is an urgent need to re-appraise existing legislation at national and state levels to include new, aggressively invasive landscape-dominating woody weeds.

I refer to the Senate Standing Committee's Terms of Reference section b. 'Australia's state of preparedness for new environmental incursions', which includes eight inclusive points relevant to this specific issue, e.g. point 1V. 'the adequacy of current protocols and surveillance and their implementation for high priority environmental risks.'

Present legislation is not flexible enough to allow regulation of new weed threats, irrespective of whether they are new extra-continental imports, or existing species (including some Australian native species that have become recently activated). In addition, sufficient research has not been done to determine which woody and herbaceous weeds are serious threats at regional levels. This needs further attention because woody weeds in particular can and do diminish the present capacity of vegetative communities to compete, contributing to biodiversity decline and survival within affected habitats.

A new approach toward protecting remaining biological values must be developed before further devastating losses to biodiversity occur. At a regional level, present regulations in Victoria (*Flora & Fauna Conservation Guarantee Act 1988; Conservation & Land Protection Act 2004*) should be amended to include recently discovered landscape-altering weeds, including native species establishing outside of their endemic range. Consideration should be given to a permitted list approach as a new tool for weed legislation.

Discussion: Coastcare groups and local allied groups in the far south west of Western Victoria have been frustrated in applying for grants with which to eradicate, or at least control, woody invasive weeds which, because they are not on any current noxious list, do not comply with existing grant application requirements. Further, native species such as the highly invasive Sweet Pittosporum (*Pittosporum undulatum* Vent.) and the Western Australian Blue-bell Creeper (*Billardiera fusiformis* Labill.), despite their habitat-altering capacities, cannot be removed without special permits which is both an unsatisfactory and complex process. Thus many grant applications by community volunteer groups for woody weed removal must include a declared noxious species in an area if funding is to be secured.

This obvious anomaly between invasion by newly emerging non-endemic weeds and the current noxious weed lists is a vexatious contradiction. A further contradiction is that the

many plant nurseries continue to sell non-listed weeds such as Polygala (*Polygala myrtifolia* L.), Sweet Pittosporum, Italian Buckthorn (*Rhamnus alaternus* L), Coast Wattle (*Acacia longifolia* subsp. *sophorae* (Andrews) Willd. subsp. *sophorae* (Labill.) Court), amongst many others. The garden nursery industry needs to be better educated to the negative ecological ramifications and estimated costs of \$4 billion annually each to agriculture/horticulture and the natural environment, with both incentives and controlling regulations made to encourage the nursery industry to take greater responsibility for selling known but not necessarily listed weed plants to the public.

Current research by government agencies are obliged to construct their research so that it correctly informs government policy setting. Current research and funding priorities are directed primarily at the agricultural sector, leaving environmental protection, including habitat restoration initiatives inadequately financed. Further, climate changes are already an actuality and may be already altering the function of native ecosystems. Such changes may be a prelude to new emerging weeds and future loss of habitats: ecological literacy is fundamental to understanding how ecosystems interact, but abysmally lacks in education.

The question then becomes: how and what can be done to recover sensible, science-based, objective policies to prevent further damage to our already threatened habitats and ecosystems? The use of a precautionary approach is currently being promoted by many weed managers, which proposes a white list (or permitted list) of plants, based on risk assessment before their use is permitted. This is aligned to applying the precautionary principle and aims to promote a fundamental change in how weeds are managed.

Because prevention is better, and more cost effective than cure, a permitted list is seen as a means of preventing the use of invasive plant species in future. Predicting which species will become invasive before they are released into the environment must surely lessen costs compared to the high costs of eradication or of ongoing weed control.

With around 9000 weeds to contend with but only comparatively a few hundred subject to legislation, a permitted list would complement the existing 'black list' approach that has so far abjectly failed to keep pace with new weed invaders, let alone already established naturalised weeds.

Conclusion: Newly emerged weeds such as beach daisy (*Arctotheca populifolia* (P.J. Bergius) and existing ones such as coast wattle, require an innovative, more effective approach to manage their invasiveness. A process such as a permitted list (as advocated by the Invasive Species Council of Australia) should be explored and where considered relative, implemented by governments to aid community volunteers and other agencies to more effectively combat the battle against weeds.

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