

Engaging communities for research on contentious issues

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Abstract

In 2006, the Central West and Western Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) began a program of research in collaboration with the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water (DECCW), landholders and other partners on the serious issue of invasive native scrub (INS, also known as woody weeds). Nine research projects were implemented with the support of research organisations. The research projects relied heavily on the support of landholders across the Cobar Penneplain. However, native vegetation management and INS have a long and turbulent history in parts of central west and western NSW. The INS research program faced barriers of distrust of government, community cynicism and lack of faith in research processes. Through open communication, transparent processes and a program of community engagement, the program has successfully engaged landholders to implement a series of research projects.

Introduction

About invasive native scrub

INS is a serious issue affecting large areas of central and western NSW. Before European settlement, this region was thought to be a mosaic of open grasslands, woodlands and denser scrub areas (INSW, 2010).

Now INS dominates the landscape in many areas, particularly on the Cobar Penneplain. This encroaching and dense regeneration of native trees and shrubs can lead to environmental, production and social problems.

The INS phenomenon has been observed in rangelands across the globe and is thought to be caused by one or more of changes to grazing, rainfall and fire regimes.

Trust us, we're from the government

INS and native vegetation management can be contentious issues in parts of central western and western NSW. The introduction of the *Native Vegetation Conservation Act 1997* strongly constrained INS treatment. There were a number of high profile blockades of government compliance officers during this period.

The introduction of the *Native Vegetation Act 2003* and subsequent Environmental Outcomes Assessment Methodology provided special provisions to treat INS. Landholders are able to treat up to 80% of the extent of INS on their property through a Property Vegetation Plan (PVP).

There are still some community perceptions that INS cannot be treated under the current legislation. At the commencement of the INS research program there was also widespread resistance to the PVP approval process.

Many landholders we needed to engage had been involved in previous government vegetation planning processes. There was widespread community dissatisfaction with previous engagement processes and outcomes. This presented the risk of our work being associated with previous engagement on native vegetation management. As one landholder observed after the program's first workshop:

'...it was a veg meeting. A good one, but still a veg meeting.'

There was also a community perception that research reports may be 'shelved' or tailored to suit others' agendas. These perceptions were raised at the initial workshops and later at the Nyngan launch of the landholder knowledge report.

Community distrust and cynicism was a potential major barrier to the research program's success. The following landholder comments on the feedback sheets from the initial workshops demonstrate this issue:

"A good day but just hope it does not end up like all the other meetings which have led nowhere."

“We enjoyed it and found some useful information. However, the landholders need to be made aware of any change in policy to get their confidence back. They will not come to meetings at the moment as they are wearied by 12 years of frustration.”

Developing a robust research program

The program’s Advisory Group was formed, consisting of scientists and landholders. The role of this group was to strategically advise on research and community engagement. The Management Team was formed of CMA and DECCW staff. Their role was to provide direct guidance to the research projects.

The program employed a dedicated Program Coordinator. A Communications Officer was also employed to work on program-wide community engagement and with individual researchers as required. This robust structure meant the program could be run cohesively and community engagement could be undertaken strategically.

It also meant the program could demonstrate transparency. This structure was formally recognised through an organisational chart and circulated to program stakeholders and landholders.

A community engagement strategy was implemented to raise awareness of the program, its intentions and let the community know we wanted to work with them.

The need for community engagement

The program needed the community’s support.

Firstly, researchers needed access to private properties to carry out their projects. Many properties in the region were still carrying signage saying unauthorised access is prohibited, a remnant of the times when compliance action and blockades were prevalent.

Secondly, we needed the community to be willing to share their INS management experiences.

Thirdly, for landholders to adopt INS 'best practice' coming from this work, they needed to have ownership of the results.

A government-driven research program would face challenges if landholders were unsure of its intentions or purpose.

Community engagement activity

Workshops were held in Nyngan and Cobar at the program's commencement. The community had the opportunity to meet researchers, see details of the projects and ask questions. The two days were attended by 32 landholders.

Field days and information sessions were later conducted to help encourage best practice and information sharing amongst landholders. One was conducted on the property 'Florida' to showcase the results of the INS management. The second was conducted on 'Hermitage Plains' in conjunction with the launch of the program's management guide. Six information sessions were held on INS seedling management. Over 170 landholders attended the eight events.

Information sheets were developed for each of the nine projects and the overall program itself. These sheets were given to landholders events and sent when 'cold calling' for access to study sites. The information sheets were a means of showing transparency and allowing landholders to register their interest.

CMA staff cold-called properties across the study region for access to study sites. While nearly half of the 60 landholders contacted did not return messages or declined to be involved, this was a successful exercise arranging access to study sites.

The three landholders sitting on the Advisory Group also actively promoted the program and were very instrumental in arranging access to study sites.

Two letters were sent to the community about the program. The first was sent to landholders over the study area with an information package to introduce the program, its purpose and the details of the nine projects.

A second was sent to landholders providing researchers with access to research sites on their properties. These were sent in response to concerns from landholders that information specific to their property could be used against them. The following excerpt highlights our message: “We are committed to protecting the privacy of landholders who are working with us on this program. We will take every possible step to ensure that any identifiable information supplied to researchers and Catchment Management Authority (CMA) staff, or gained through the program’s activities, remains confidential and is only used for the purposes for which it was collected. This is consistent with privacy legislation.”

Overall 12 media releases and three advertisements were sent to Nyngan and Cobar media to maintain a local presence in the community.

The newsletter *Scrubbed Up* was developed to update those involved in the program on its progress. This was produced on an ad-hoc basis, with five issues released.

The program produced a detailed INS best management guide, which was based on research findings, previously published information and landholder experiences.

Discussion

The program successfully engaged landholders across the study region to facilitate research and progress INS management. At the program’s final Advisory Group meeting community support was highlighted as the key to the program’s success.

The program placed particular emphasis on valuing land managers’ knowledge and experiences. This was demonstrated through:

- landholder membership on the Advisory Group
- a project to formally document landholders’ knowledge of INS management
- working with landholders to develop practical resources such as case studies.

The program was open about its purpose, structure and project details. This transparency was paramount to building trust and credibility amongst the community. The formal community engagement strategy facilitated this. Landholders had the opportunity to meet researchers and staff and ask questions.

Through providing case studies, field days and management information, the program was able to demonstrate its practical benefits to landholders.

While some projects are ongoing, the overall research program has concluded. There was strong community interest during the release of the INS best management guide.

This is a result of:

- the community being aware of the research program and its intentions
- maintaining a consistent local presence over the course of the program via field days, workshops, media, mailouts and phone calls
- landholders actively working with researchers and dedicated CMA staff
- information being provided was considered useful for the management of INS.

References

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