



Victorian Blackberry Taskforce Submission – 'Modernisation of the Victorian Regional Forest Agreements'

Background- Victorian Blackberry Taskforce

The Victorian Blackberry Taskforce (VBT) was formed in 2001 to draft the Victorian Blackberry Strategy (VBS), a collaborative approach to tackling the spread and impact of blackberry in Victoria. The VBT has initiated a diverse range of blackberry control programs in partnership with state, regional and local resource managers, as well as community organisations and private landholders.

The VBT committee is made up of community members, a research scientist and representatives from Parks Victoria, Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, Department Environment, Land, Water and Planning and Parks Victoria.

The VBT oversees the implementation of the Victorian Blackberry Strategy (VBS). Link to VBS- https://vicblackberrytaskforce.com.au/VBT_staging2018/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Victorian-Blackberry-Strategy-2014-2019.pdf

One of the principal objectives of the Victorian Blackberry Taskforce to provide state-wide leadership in blackberry management. As blackberry is a widespread weed impacting on all land uses and tenures the VBT engages with a diverse range of stakeholders and is made aware of their land management concerns. The VBT has a role in liaison with land management agencies on behalf of communities to encourage integrated approaches to invasive species management, not only blackberry. This is achieved through advocacy, collaboration and education.

This submission is based on the input provided by VBT community members, focusing on the health and use of Victoria's forests and the effect that invasive species including, but not only, blackberry, (*Rubus fruticosus*) have on the productive and environmental values of Public Land.

Theme One: Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management

1.1 Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management

- *How could the RFAs better provide for multiple forest uses (i.e. recreation, conservation, livelihood and economy)?*

The Victorian Blackberry Taskforce (VBT) receives many enquiries about blackberry infestations in Victorian forests. Many involve private landholders adjacent to public Land or people who visit and use the amenities of Victorian Forests.

Invasive pests, including blackberry can affect recreational activities, including fishing, hunting, bush walking and other forms of passive enjoyment of the forests. For example, blackberry infestations place constraints on access to streams and rivers and feedback from hunters suggest that their activities are regularly curtailed as blackberry provides harbour for deer while being impenetrable to their pursuers.

RFA's need to provide a plan of action to educate all users of forests in Victoria about the impacts their activities have in spreading noxious weeds and pathogens, especially in ecologically sensitive areas. Engaging users to be part of stewardship activities on a broad scale by removing barriers and overturning the belief that 'someone' usually Government is actively managing Parks and Forests would benefit the long term management objectives identified in the new RFA.

There are many avenues for connecting with interest groups including through organisations such as 4 wheel drive clubs and groups such as the Victorian National Parks Association. The message must be simple and relate to the part individuals and groups can play in contributing to improving the condition of forests now eg by working with volunteer groups or as part of an organisation. Education about the threat to ecosystems of the movement of weed seed and plant material can be better targeted through user groups than by general information. Devising messages which focus on particular interests and how a user group can help eg good vehicle hygiene practices so forests in the future remain accessible and ecologically sustainable.

1.2 Conserve Forest Diversity and Maintain Ecosystem Health

- *What are your views on existing environmental protections afforded across the entire forest estate (including parks, reserves and State forests) through the RFAs?*
- *How could the environmental protections be improved? –*

The VBT understands the 'Generalised invasive curve' for invasive plants and animals and the importance of investing and targeting new and emerging pests, for a greater return on investment. However, the threats to environmental and recreational values have not been well managed or understood during the 20 year period of the current RFA, hence Governments and communities are ill prepared for the impact of deer and other emerging invasive species, not only on Public Land assets but also on private land Interface and beyond.

Consideration must be given to adequate resourcing of Public Land Managers to plan and implement effective, ongoing programs to manage invasive plants and animals. The absence of adequate investment to achieve sustainable reductions in threatening processes is considered by forest users and private land neighbours, to be an abrogation of the custodial responsibilities of Government. The VBT hears from many communities and organisations about the condition of Public Land in Victoria and provides information sessions for communities to understand how to manage invasive issues on public private interface.

Innovative ways or enabling communities to contribute to weed control on public land are long overdue. Good Neighbour Program (GNP) provides resources for Parks Victoria and Forest Fire Management to carry out weed control works on public/ private land boundaries. Consideration of value adding to the GNP budget by resourcing groups and adjoining landholders to undertake coordinated management programs on their boundaries could increase the area of weeds controlled. This approach is becoming easier to manage and monitor with digital devices and apps (existing or able to be designed) to monitor works and track progress. A review of the stringent rules around community involvement on public land in respect to invasive species control may encourage greater ownership of the management of public forest.

Since 2006 the VBT has delivered a series of Invasive Species Forums with input from community and Municipal Councils. Blackberry and deer were both highlighted as issues arising on Public Land and impacting on private assets. Also flagged by the Victorian community are pigs and goats which suggest that these species are making their presence felt and are impacting on the environmental values of forests.

The VBT engaged Dr Greg Baxter, a scientist from the University of Queensland, to present his research on deer populations at community forums in rural and Interface local government areas where both deer and blackberry are having impacts on forest ecosystems and onto private land. He detailed future population trends for deer in Australia and the associated risks to the environment and biodiversity values. Control options were also discussed. Link below to Greg Baxter presentation.

https://vicblackberrytaskforce.com.au/VBT_staging2018/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Deer_in_Australia_Whittlesea.pdf

The VBT believe it is important to seek and develop innovative solutions for the management of forests with community, which could include:

- Genuine consultation with communities to find out what they think and hear from grass roots users. This might mean workshops to cater for those who don't or can't take on line surveys or don't engage. Perhaps these could be convened and run in Victoria by groups such as the Victorian Community Pest Management Groups are non aligned and who have extensive experience in finding out what people think and listening to their ideas.
- Allowing commercial harvesting of deer on public land. Introducing a commercial incentive, in addition to recreational hunting, to control deer using a business approach thereby providing jobs, creating economic benefits and improving environmental outcomes at the same time. It is an emerging industry which is currently not supported on public land, but which provides extensive benefits to reducing deer numbers on private land. Impediments to implementing this approach on public land could be identified, co management plans developed and suitable safeguards put in place where necessary.
- Wider implementation of a North East Victoria Pilot Good Neighbour Program which allows suitably qualified private landholders to control blackberry on neighbouring public land. This was instigated by the North East Blackberry Action Group as a result of a workshop in 2016. Link to VBT Newsletter article-

'Cooperative Boundary Management Pilot Project on the pilot program' - May 2018

https://vicblackberrytaskforce.com.au/VBT_staging2018/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/VBTNews_07_May2018.pdf

Theme Three: Governance and Management of Victoria's Forests

3.2 Identify Research Priorities

- *What areas of research would better equip us to sustainably manage Victoria's forests?*

The VBT recognises blackberry biocontrol as a long term, cost-effective option to reduce the impacts of the invasive species across a landscape area. As an example, blackberry leaf rust fungus (*Phragmidium violaceum*) released in Victoria in 2008, has been successful in reducing blackberry biomass in open areas but has little or no effect under canopy.

Purple Blotch Disease (PBD) (*Septocyta ruborum*), a promising biocontrol agent which is active in shady areas and results in the death of the blackberry, would be an effective biocontrol method. Research into this pathogen, which was funded by the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments, ceased in 2012. The VBT has since commissioned a bio-control research proposal, which includes PBD.

Biocontrol for blackberry is especially appropriate for widespread weeds on public land because of the scale of the problem, difficult terrain and the sensitivities and logistics of large scale herbicide application. This means that for large areas of the public land estate, biocontrol is the only option.

Recently the VBT and RMIT developed a diagnostic tool for PBD and similar pathogens to assist with identification for future research.

For the past 20 years there has been minimal investment in blackberry biocontrol and the research not well supported. An action of the renewed RFA could be that Government takes a lead role in supporting biocontrol research for 'public good'. An effective blackberry biocontrol tool for shaded areas is essential for reducing blackberry infestations in public and private land native forest and in the plantation estate

3.3 Improve Monitoring and Reporting

- *How could RFA monitoring, review (including five-yearly reviews) and reporting arrangements be improved?*

The VBT believes that 'robust data' is important in monitoring the objectives of the RFAs and supports the use of Citizen Science, in addition to technical and structured scientific methods, to monitor the effectiveness of the implementation of RFA recommendations. Citizen Science is an excellent avenue for engaging the community and interest groups with the objective of increasing the human resources to achieve on ground action.

Engagement with scientists is essential, especially in the development and use of new technologies in invasive species management in the future.
Evaluation using data collected should be a 5 year milestone of the RFA and attention given to ensuring these milestones are met.