



Ted Alter
Professor, Penn State University



Tanya Howard
Post-Doctoral Research Fellow
University of New England



Darren Marshall
Acting CEO, Queensland Murray-Darling Commission



Andrew Holm
Director, Biosecurity and Agriculture Services
Agriculture Victoria



Lyn Coulston
Chairperson, Victorian Blackberry Taskforce



Michael Reid
Program Manager – Established Invasive Species,
Agriculture Victoria

The Weeds and Rabbits Project is boosting the community engagement skills of aspiring leaders from across Victoria, to support more effective invasive species control.



The Weeds and Rabbits project in Victoria is a 4.3 million dollar initiative, looking at supporting community-led approaches and strategies to managing invasive species. So when we're talking about widely established weeds such as blackberry gorse, serrated tussock rabbits... These issues are public issues, they are common pool issues, we need to work across government, we need to work across industry and we need to work across communities. We know that farmers on average spend about 43 a year managing these species, we know that they have significant agricultural impacts, we know that there is significant environmental cost, and we also know that there are also social costs which are a significant point of tension for rural communities.



Community engagement is all about achieving an outcome on the ground. There are so many different perspectives: perspective of the people on the ground, and there's researchers, there's local governments, there's state government, there's industry groups... all these people trying to influence the land managers on the ground of the best ways to do this. So if I can get the perspectives of all of those -researchers, governments, industry groups- and bring that to the land holders and develop ownership from everybody, then we can achieve something on ground to address that issue.



Being able to frame the problem together, be able to look at solutions together, and be able to deliver much better outcomes. The closer that we are working across those different groups, the more chance we are going to have at being able to manage invasive species here in Victoria.



And blackberry is a good example. Our community started to raise concerns, so we said, okay, well, why don't we get together and see if there's anything we can do about it ourselves? So it's not, maybe somebody should do something, maybe the government should do something, it's maybe we should do something. I guess the learning is, unless you've got ownership and involvement, you won't achieve anything. And people have to sign on to that and say, "I've got some ownership of this, "and I'm happy to step up."



Leadership in that space is more of a practise and a way of working, in terms of how do we do and solve that together? What are the issues and challenges we face working through to understand that? But also what do we have in common, and how can we do that together.



It's always about listening, sharing, facilitating collaboration and bringing people together. It doesn't matter what the venue is. It's always about working with and for people, and acknowledging and recognising and respecting their points of view and their dignity as human beings.



It's a part of the way you operate. It needs to be the way that you work with people. You have to listen. It comes back to that topic of ownership, that if you can have people on board, discussing things, agreeing, listening, having an open mind, then you can work together to develop a plan that hopefully you can achieve something.



The most important thing to support community-led action is to keep faith with the community, saying, "Well, what can we do, "and how can you help? "Your ideas are important." If you have a workshop and you've asked people to give you their time, if after the workshop they never hear from you again, and nothing ever happened, you'll be lucky to get them involved in anything again.



It's also about innovation, innovation in the sense of creating those spaces where people can come together and talk democratically about the things that are important to them, and strive to find a resolution.



This is a challenge that so many of us need to be working on together, not one of us, as any individual stakeholder, can deal with alone, and it's how we work together in doing that.

The weeds and RAbbits project is funded through the federal Government's Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper, and delivered by Agriculture Victoria.