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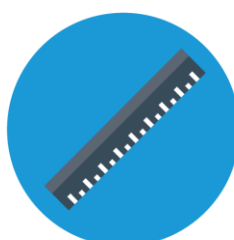
## Executive Summary

# Impact Analysis of the Weeds and Rabbits Project

Prepared for



RESEARCH



EVALUATION



DESIGN

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## Document details

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## Acknowledgement of country

We acknowledge and respect Victorian Traditional Owners as the original custodians of Victoria's land and waters, their unique ability to care for Country and deep spiritual connection to it. We honour Elders past and present whose knowledge and wisdom has ensured the continuation of culture and traditional practices. Agriculture Victoria are committed to genuinely partner, and meaningfully engage, with Victoria's Traditional Owners and Aboriginal communities to support the protection of Country, the maintenance of spiritual and cultural practices and their broader aspirations in the 21st century and beyond.

## Aboriginal self-determination

The Victorian Government is committed to self-determination as the guiding principle in Aboriginal affairs as set out in the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-2023. Government action to enable self-determination acknowledges that Aboriginal Victorians hold the knowledge and expertise about what is best for themselves, their families and their communities. This principle is a key driver of the approach Agriculture Victoria has taken in this work to engage with the Traditional Owners and Aboriginal communities on biosecurity.

## Executive summary

### The Weeds and Rabbits Project

Invasive species cause substantial amounts of economic and environmental damage across Australia. A recent estimate puts the annual economic cost alone at \$24.5 billion per year. In addition to the scale of the impact, effective management of established invasive species is well-recognised as being challenging – and is often conceptualised as a ‘wicked’ problem. This is due to the scale and complexity of the threat (particularly for widespread invasive species), the diversity of stakeholders and the interdependencies between land managers across the landscape.

The Weeds and Rabbits Project (the Project) is a \$4.3 million initiative (2016-2021) to improve the way established pest animals and weeds are managed in Victoria. It was funded under the Australian Government’s 2015 Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper and managed by Agriculture Victoria. The Project recognises that for weed and rabbit management to become more effective and sustainable, there is a need to build the capability and capacity of people who lead, coordinate and support invasive species management activities.

The project has implemented a ‘systems-strengthening approach’ to understand the complexity of issues affecting rabbit and weed management. Its focus has been on supporting collective, community-led action on weeds and rabbits, and building collaborative working relationships between government, industry and the community.

The Project objectives are to:

1. Empower the community to manage widely established weeds and pest animals.
2. Implement changes to the management systems of widely established pests in Victoria.

The approach targets rabbits, serrated tussock, gorse and blackberry, and builds on existing collaborations with voluntary Community Pest Management Groups (CPMGs) – the Victorian Rabbit Action Network (VRAN), the Victorian Serrated Tussock Working Party (VSTWP), the Victorian Gorse Taskforce (VGT) and the Victorian Blackberry Taskforce (VBT).

The Weeds and Rabbits Project delivered three rounds of community-level grants and a range of other interventions to map and address opportunities in the established invasive species system within Victoria. In line with its objectives, the Project was structured around a Delivery Leadership Group (DLG) that involved Agriculture Victoria and representatives the four CPMGs.

### This report

As the Weeds and Rabbits Project draws to a close in mid-2021, this report assesses and documents its impacts and the lessons for future work in this space.

The impact analysis aims to assess the difference the Project has made across different levels of the established invasive species system. This includes:

- evaluating the Weeds and Rabbits Project’s impacts and benefits across the community grants, governance and systems strengthening activities

- assessing progress against investment themes and knowledge gaps identified in the project's foundational activities and publications
- highlighting any gaps where future work is recommended, and any elements of the project design which could be improved.

**Key steps in this impact analysis included:**

- Initial scoping with Agriculture Victoria and the members of the DLG.
- Review of existing documents and data.
- Interviews with key stakeholders (39). This included:
  - CPMG members, chairs and Executive Officers (23)
  - Agriculture Victoria staff involved in establishing and managing the project (7)
  - recipients of other grants and participants in key Project events (7)
  - Agriculture Victoria staff involved in management of established weeds and pests but not directly involved in the Project (2).
- Analysis and development of this report, including presentation and discussion of the key findings.

**Project impacts - Empowering the community to manage pest animals and weeds**

The Weeds and Rabbits Project worked to empower the community to manage pest animals and weeds by:

- supporting CPMGs to deliver projects that enable the community and key land managers to control weeds and rabbits (Figure 1)
- building capacity of CPMGs themselves to work more efficiently and effectively
- delivering other initiatives at the Project-level to support community management, including work with young people, a masterclass, leadership training and research on communication gaps.

In terms of supporting and extending the work of CPMGs, the Weeds and Rabbits Project helped CPMGs to:

- **Raise awareness** about weed and rabbit issues and land managers' responsibilities. The Project enabled CPMGs to do more of this work, including using broader-reaching channels such as social media and community service announcements. As an example of what this means in terms of awareness of weed and rabbit issues, the VGT EO indicated that inquiries to the VGT have more than doubled over the course of the Project.
- **Provide advice** to land managers in best-practice control techniques – with the Weeds and Rabbits Project allowing a broader range of events to be delivered across a wider geographic area. The VSTWP 'field days in the core' project, for example, included a field day with over 40 participants that provided insights and advice on approaches to serrated tussock control from experts such as agronomists and spray contractors. Overall, CPMGs delivered 223 workshops and events and engaged 5,069 people through the Project.
- **Support collaboration** between land managers to work together in delivering an integrated, landscape-level approach to weed and rabbit control. The VBT, for example, supported the

formation of two Blackberry Action Groups that comprise members of a local community who are interested and engaged in controlling blackberry in their areas.

- **Provide resources** to land managers to help overcome some of the financial barriers to weed and rabbit control. This often took the form of small grants to help landholders with the costs of contractors or equipment or herbicide.
- **Build the capacity of key community members and organisations** in weed and pest control who, in turn, provide on-ground support to landholders. This has been one of the key approaches of VRAN through their rabbit management bootcamp.



Figure 1. Select summary outputs for the Weeds and Rabbits Project.

In addition to contributing to and enhancing the work being done by CPMGs, the Weeds and Rabbits Project also helped to build the underlying capabilities of CPMGs themselves, often in ways that are expected to have lasting benefits:

- **Developing resources, tools and other information-containing materials** – materials that groups will be able to continue to use in raising awareness about weed and rabbit control
- **Improving knowledge and skills in best-practice techniques** – such as projects that improved the evidence base for decision-making or the quality of the advice being given to landholders.

- **Refine their organisational structures and strategic approach** – such as supporting evaluations and strategic planning to help groups better understand where to put their efforts.

The final key mechanism through which the Weeds and Rabbits Project supported community action on weeds and pests was through Project-level interventions:

- The ‘Young people and invasive species project’, with follow-up youth engagement grants, which engaged 1252 people (almost 90% of whom were students or younger people) across 29 events and reaching more than 85 groups.
- A Masterclass on Leadership in Community Engagement for Invasive Species Management. Twenty-five people participated in the masterclass. They reported improvements to their skills and knowledge of invasive species management and community engagement and strengthened networks that would help them in their work with communities on invasive species management into the future.
- Ten grants to support participation in the Victorian Regional Community Leaders Program, with participants identifying a range of benefits in terms of their confidence and networks and ability to work with people in improving land management outcomes.

### Project impacts – Strengthening the established invasive species system

The three ways in which the Project has contributed to this objective were:

- **Developing a better understanding of the system.** With its namesake focus being a systems-strengthening approach to improving the management of established weeds and pests in Victoria, the first component of the Weeds and Rabbits project was to explore and develop a better understanding of this system. The system maps, reports and associated discussion provided a substantial evidence base and detailed analysis on which other elements of the Weeds and Rabbits Project were built. The flow through from the systems mapping work, ultimately, led to projects such as the youth grants, the masterclass and the information dissemination projects being developed.
- **Changing the underlying approach of CPMGs and their networks.** The most prominent way in which the Weeds and Rabbits Project strengthened the established invasive species system was through important changes to the way that CPMGs operate:
  - Three of the four CPMGs have evolved their approach to communications and engagement in ways that will help expand their reach.
  - Alongside changes in how they communicate, CPMGs have also shifted who they are working with. This includes an expansion of where they are working, but also a broadening of the partners they are collaborating with.
  - Around half of the interviewees for this project indicated that the CPMGs have developed stronger relationships with each other, are learning from each other and working with each other more.

- **Changing the way in which Agriculture Victoria and the CPMGs work together.** The community-led focus of the Weeds and Rabbits Project represents a fundamentally different way of approaching a project than typical for Agriculture Victoria. By deliberately and purposefully devolving decision-making about resources to community-level organisations (i.e. the CPMGs) Agriculture Victoria has created more links with these groups and helped identify an opportunity for ongoing collaboration and communication among the groups and between the groups and Agriculture Victoria. The outstanding gap that Agriculture Victoria are continuing to work on is reforming their compliance and enforcement program in light of research funded by the Weeds and Rabbits Project to ensure it is well-understood by the community, is cost-effective and can effectively support the CPMGs in their community-level efforts.

### Lessons for the future

Feedback and other data collected as part of this project provide a range of insights on the lessons and opportunities for future work in this space, particularly with respect to:

- **Capability-building and collaboration between CPMGs.** While the Project could have encouraged more cross-group collaboration earlier in the project, **there is clear value in continuing collaboration between the CPMGs, potentially through a DLG-like forum.**
- **Project management and governance.** The project was well-managed and governed, particularly in terms of the flexibility it afforded and the structure of its governance. However, future projects should be mindful of:
  - the resources required by groups to manage grant projects and the additional burden this puts on staff and volunteers
  - the opportunity to communicate and collaborate more extensively across Agriculture Victoria
  - the opportunity to have had more integration across Project components – such as bringing participants from leadership programs back into other Project activities to further share knowledge and expand networks.
- **Future work with the community on established invasive species.** Beyond the Weeds and Rabbits Project itself, there are opportunities for the CPMGs and Agriculture Victoria to consider into the future, including:
  - Agriculture Victoria’s approach to this project – i.e. its elevation and prioritisation of community input and engagement, shared decision-making and taking a systems-based approach– should be considered more broadly within the organisation, particularly for initiatives that have an impact on or strong link to community action.
  - Building off the successes of initiatives such as VRAN’s bootcamp, there appears to be an opportunity for CPMGs to continue to or expand their work in upskilling ‘intermediary’ stakeholders in best-practice control techniques for their species.
  - As the Agriculture Victoria compliance team develops new approaches based on the insights from this Project, it will be important to engage with CPMGs throughout this

process to ensure their views and needs are understood and that, vice versa, the approach and challenges facing Agriculture Victoria are clearly communicated.

- While we acknowledge the funding model for CPMGs is currently being reviewed, future support could include shared resources across the CPMGs – such as communication and engagement staff - that could bring skills and time to support CPMG work across the state.



## Acronyms

CMA	Catchment Management Authority
CPMG	Community Pest Management Group
DLG	Delivery Leadership Group
EO	Executive Officer
FPC	First Person Consulting
MERI	Monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement
PCB	Project Control Board
VBT	Victorian Blackberry Taskforce
VGT	Victorian Gorse Taskforce
VRAN	Victorian Rabbit Action Network
VSTWP	Victorian Serrated Tussock Working Party

## Case study 1

### Benefits of the VRAN Bootcamp – Travis, City of Greater Geelong

Travis is an Environmental Project Officer within the City of Greater Geelong. In this role, he is responsible for roadside weed and rabbit control.

A couple of years ago Travis attended a VRAN bootcamp, which has led to positive impacts for his work. Travis reflects that he went into the bootcamp with limited understanding and experience with rabbit control. However, after he came out of the intensive bootcamp his knowledge and confidence in dealing with rabbit control had significantly increased. The bootcamp provided him with a greater understanding of ‘what to do, how to go about it and the need to share knowledge’ with community members who enquire about rabbit control.



Caption: VRAN bootcamp participants meeting as part of a broader learning network

Photo Credit: <https://vran.com.au/vran-projects/leaps-and-bounds-learning-network/> D. Kleinert



Caption: Rabbit and damaged soil

Photo Credit: <https://vran.com.au/vran-projects/leaps-and-bounds-learning-network/> D. Kleinert

Previously the City of Greater Geelong had relied mostly on baiting. However, stemming from Travis’ newfound knowledge, they are now implementing an integrated rabbit control program. In addition to baiting rabbits, there is a greater focus on treating warrens, using techniques such as ripping and fumigation, and harbour removal).

Travis has also been developing a Rabbit Control Plan for the City of Greater Geelong, which is almost complete. This plan is committed to best practice with integrated strategies and adaptation plans in place to meet site specific constraints, such as the presence of native vegetation, cultural heritage, or underground services. The plan sets some ambitious goals and Travis is very confident that the plan will be a success.

Through the bootcamp, Travis has built valuable connections with some of the mentors involved.

One of the mentors was involved a fair bit to start with, he shared additional technical information on best practice rabbit control in a consultancy role. He came to a few of our sites and provided advice on what to do there.

Travis' attendance at the bootcamp also marked the beginning of his involvement with VRAN. He has since been working to improve the council's rabbit control practices, building connections and relationships with rabbit control experts, and feeling more linked into available resources including knowledge and grants. Travis comments, 'being involved with the VRAN network is great. It feels like you are not alone and there are others going through the same challenges'.

**Key insight: This example shows how the program has made an impact. It has changed behaviour from simply baiting rabbits, to development of an integrated control program, using the network for better access to support and advice throughout this shift.**

## Case study 2

### Best Practice Serrated Tussock Weed Hygiene Guide – Sylvana, Regional Roads Victoria

Regional Roads Victoria are responsible for roadside maintenance and rehabilitation works. In Sylvana's role, she oversees grass slashing, where hygiene is critical.

Sylvana works closely with Agriculture Victoria on compliance and has been involved with the Victorian Serrated Tussock Working Party (VSTWP) over the years, to prevent and control the spread of serrated tussock. Sylvana notes that there has been a positive shift overtime, with stakeholders including herself taking responsibility and implementing best practice changes to control and reduce the spread of weeds.

Recently, Sylvana used the VSTWP's Best Practice Serrated Tussock Hygiene Guide to implement practice changes and create contract specific clauses for grass slashing on the Western Highway. Sylvana describes that the guide covers contract management, capacity building for contractors, how to implement the best practice in the contract including inspections and sanitation and embedding weed hygiene within an organisation.



Front cover of Best Practice Serrated Tussock Hygiene Guide.(Photo credit VSTWP)

Upon accessing this resource, Sylvana has coordinated weed infestation data (provided by Agriculture Victoria) and created maps that identify 'hold points' around areas of infestations where the contractor must wash down their machinery and take photographic evidence of the washdown. She has also installed physical markers to delineate areas of infestation. These contract specific clauses ensure that contractors are following best practice to control and reduce the spread of weeds.

Sylvana reflects that previously the clause required vehicles to be washed down but amending the contract specific clauses and adding additional requirements ensures that it is being done. Sylvana reflects that implementing these changes has assisted with the control of serrated tussock and needle grass, a close relative of serrated tussock.

Prior to development of the Best Practice serrated tussock hygiene guide, Sylvana said that there were 'bits and pieces of information but nothing like this one, which has everything that you need to

know about weed hygiene'. Through implementing these practice and contract changes, Sylvana has ensured that best practice is adhered to with maintenance and prevention to the spread of weeds.

Furthermore, prior to COVID-19 Sylvana was in the process of coordinating a weed hygiene course for maintenance staff and contractors to build organisational capacity and the embedding of weed hygiene, which was also inspired from the best practice guide.

Sylvana reflects that 'before the guide came out, I needed advice and had all of these burning questions with no support, but the guide answered all of those... Now that it is formalised and in a comprehensive guide, it strengthens and give justification for implementing best practice throughout all of our works.'

**Key insight: This example shows how some of the work done by CPMGs to produce outputs (guides, tools, etc.) has flowed through to support land managers and other stakeholders in shifting behaviours around weed management – in this case, around behaviours that will reduce the spread of weeds.**

## Case study 3

### Future environment leaders of Nillumbik – Stephanie, Youth grant

Stephanie is a Land Manager at Nillumbik Shire Council, who designed and hosted the Future Environment Leaders of Nillumbik project, funded under the youth grants.

This project involved an intensive leadership retreat with community members aged 18 to 35 years, focusing on invasive species management. The retreat was attended by 17 young adults and was delivered in partnership with Intrepid Landcare and the Osborne Peninsula Landcare Network. Various activities were held with a focus on building confidence, capacity and leadership skills, to build awareness of local invasive species issues and support youth input into pest management action.

Through the retreat, participants developed their own projects to put their newly found skills and knowledge to the test. They designed three main projects involving:

- Canoeing down the Yarra River while weeding and picking up litter
- Native bush food and seed saving workshop led by a Wurundjeri elder
- Managing idle nature strips and planting native vegetation.

Stephanie received feedback from participants that although they didn't know what to expect, they learnt a lot from the retreat and feel 'spurred to pursue their passions and get more involved in environmental activities'.



Participants from the Leadership Retreat (Photo credit: Nillumbik Shire Council).

In addition to building young people's interest in invasive species management, it also had positive impacts for relationship building between the council, Landcare network, Intrepid Landcare and the participants. The weekend retreat also involved networking and relationship building activities between young people and Landcare members to promote lasting involvement and engagement of young people and embedding young people within Landcare networks.

Stephanie comments, 'I feel confident we have made lasting connections with participants and people will continue to be engaged. We are keen to maintain involvement of those we got in for the retreat and build connections with those interested in the environment in Nillumbik.'

**Key insight: Addressing the challenge of succession within groups such as Landcare, who deal with weed and rabbit management, this grant project is an example of how groups have worked to try and foster skills and interest in this area among young people.**

## Case study 4

### Masterclass outcomes

Feedback from participants involved highlighted the valuable outcomes gained through the two-day intensive masterclass.

Firstly, participants were able to further develop their skills and knowledge relating to invasive species management and community engagement for effective invasive species control. The latter component was particularly significant for participants, who reflected that the masterclass assisted them to understand the importance of community engagement in achieving positive outcomes for invasive species control, as well as factors to enhance genuine and effective community engagement practices.

Another key outcome of the masterclass was enabling stakeholders to come together to learn, connect and share experiences. An important part of the masterclass was bridging the gap between stakeholders and creating a supportive environment, where people can share their frustrations as well as successes and work together to find motivation and inspiration. As one participant commented ‘a problem shared is a problem halved’.

Furthermore, the masterclass resulted in the development of a Community of Practice (CoP). This CoP contributes to ongoing leadership in the invasive species control space, creating a pathway for sustained action. One participant described:

‘I now have access to tools, resources and new practices I have increased my networks and will be able to continue the conversation after the course.’

One participant commented that this Masterclass and the continuing CoP was a crucial component of the Weeds and Rabbits program:

‘The most significant on-ground work that we are doing within the CPMG, and as a part of the [Weeds and Rabbits] program, is the establishment, building and nurturing of learning networks that arise from the Community Leadership courses that have been advertised state-wide and run ...This work enables people to meet face to face, get to know people individually and as well as contributing to something collectively.’



Participants in the community engagement masterclass (Photo Credit: Agriculture Victoria).



## Case study 5

### A local government perspective of CPMGs – Katherine

Working within local council over the years, Katherine has been involved with each of the four CPMGs to varying extents. The way that Katherine describes it, CPMGs provide a bridge between community and the government, including playing a role in building local government capacity.

Katherine reflects that CPMGs play an important role in providing the community with expert advice that they can relate to. Acting as a conduit for information sharing, CPMGs can distribute research findings from the government to the community, and likewise they can advocate for action, research and funding from the government on communities' behalf. Further, having these community roles and enabling community to seek support from CPMGs rather than council has had very positive impacts on community engagement. Katherine notes:

‘We’re seeing greater attendance at community workshops and forums and feedback from events and programs is that people are happy with who was presenting and the materials presented.’



Katherine discussing blackberry management with representatives from a local blackberry action group and the Victorian Blackberry Taskforce. (Photo Credit: Victorian Blackberry Taskforce).

Over the period of the Weeds and Rabbits Project, Katherine explains that there has been a shift with ‘greater investment in community engagement and recognising the importance of effective community engagement and getting buy in for action’. For example, through the funding of specific engagement and communications roles within CPMGs.

In addition, CPMGs also provide valuable resources: ‘the VBT control manual is one of the most popular [resources] and council wouldn’t have the capacity to put that together’. She also describes that support in the form of capacity building activities and events, such as the VRAN bootcamp, improve the effectiveness of local government action and draw various government stakeholders across the state together. Bringing together these different players enables the building and strengthening of relationships between local and state government.

Katherine notes that changes in community behaviour relating to invasive species management is a ‘*slow burn*’ but the scale at which CPMGs operate helps to influence people. For example, the work of the VBT has led to a sustained reduction in blackberry across the landscape. This in turn

stimulates a collaborative approach and leverages action from public land managers and large enterprises.

‘Talking to landholders is one thing, but showing action at a landscape scale changes people’s perceptions about their responsibility’.