

11.3 Weed Control Funding

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Delivery Program Open Spaces and Reserves

Objective To respond to a Council resolution in respect to increasing the funding for weed control.

Background

Council resolved at its Ordinary Meeting on the 28 January 2016 that a report be presented to Council as part of the 2016/17 budget deliberations on the options to increase the overall rate of bitou bush and other high priority weed control for key scenic areas.

In response, information was included in the reporting to the Finance Committee and the Committee resolved at its meeting on 12 April 2016 to receive a report on increasing the funding for weed control over time. The following information responds to this request.

Key Issues

- Weed management
- Level of funding

Information

The following information analyses the current funding levels available for weed control activities and the demands for this service. The funding shortfall means Council must prioritize activities and target funds. It is also noted Council relies heavily on leveraging additional funds through grants and on the hard work of volunteers.

Weed Control and Bushland Management Areas

Council currently manages 582 hectares of bushland reserves that includes:

- Ballina Coastal Reserve: Shaws Bay (6 hectares), Shaws Bay escarpment (12 hectares), Lighthouse Beach (15 hectares), Shelly Beach (15 hectares), Western Shelly bushland (11 hectares), Angels Beach (29 hectares), Sharpes Beach (4 hectares), Boulders Beach (25.2 hectares), Seven Mile Beach (83 hectares), Lennox headland (39 hectares), Boulders headland (4 hectares), Skennars headland (7 hectares) and Black Head (9 hectares) and Ballina Headland (3 hectares).
- Flat Rock (41 hectares)
- Lake Ainsworth (9.9 hectares)
- Rainforest Way (2.5 hectares)
- Castle Drive Reserve (6.6 hectares)
- Lennox Palms Estate (3 hectares)
- Hutley Drive Rainforest Reserve (2 hectares)

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- Williams Reserve (1.4 hectares)
- Amber Drive (0.7 hectares)
- Northumberland Drive Reserve (4 hectares)
- Mercer Park (0.2 hectares)
- Pine Avenue/Central Avenue Reserves (1.5 hectares)
- North Creek Ballina (1 hectares)
- Chickiba Wetlands (100 hectares)
- Angels Beach Drive Reserve (6.7 hectares)
- North Lakes Ballina (5.6 hectares)
- Bicentennial Park (23.5 hectares)
- Patches Beach (1.5 hectares)
- Big Scrub remnants: Wollongbar Reserve (7 hectares), Duck Creek (5.2 hectares), Lumley Park (1.6 hectares), Dalwood Scrub (1.1 hectares), Maguires Creek (1.2 hectares), Killen Falls (1.4 hectares), Western Chilcotts Creek (6.7 hectares), Maram Creek Weir (17 hectares), Willowbank (2 hectares).
- Houghlahans Creek Reserve (8.9 hectares)
- Tintenbar Hall (0.3 hectares)
- Teven Memorial Park (4 hectares)
- Rossmore Park (4 hectares)
- Ross Lane Reserve (2.5 hectares)
- Little Fisheries Creek (0.6 hectares)
- Tara Downs (8.8 hectares).

Recent and upcoming subdivisions will create additional bushland reserves:

- Ballina Heights (19.5 hectares)
- Henderson Farm (14 hectares)
- Coastal Grove (4.22 hectares)
- Tallow Wood Place Reserve (0.8 hectare)
- North Angels (1.5 hectares).

Weed control is also incorporated into roadside maintenance programs, such as:

- Coast Road Lennox landslip rehabilitation
- Pine Avenue embankment rehabilitation and compensatory works
- Roadside Vegetation Management Plan implementation

Current Management Situation

Weed control is only one component of an integrated approach to bushland reserve management and roadside vegetation management, which involves weed control, bush regeneration of native vegetation, supplementary plantings, erosion control, and maintenance of tracks, viewing platforms, fencing and signs.

Bushland reserve management is typically estimated to cost \$2,250 per hectare.

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This calculation is based on existing bush regeneration and maintenance programs, weed control programs and average contractor rates. It assumes that a bush regeneration team of two contractors takes three days to perform weed control and bush regeneration per hectare per year.

It assumes high quality (low weed density) vegetation is being maintained.

However, sites that are heavily weed infested can cost considerably more to restore, as high as \$10,000 per hectare.

Council engages contractors to undertake bush regeneration because it does not have qualified bush regenerators on its staff. A five-year program is seen as the minimum timeframe for achieving sustainable results.

Council also relies heavily on volunteer groups. Fifteen volunteer landcare, dune care and coast care groups operate on Council managed land and provide an estimated 12,000 volunteer hours annually towards weed control/bushland restoration. This is valued conservatively at \$300,000 per annum (based on a \$25/hour labour rate).

Council supports these volunteer groups by providing chemical and first aid training, free planting supplies such as trees and mulch, and chemicals for weed control.

This is a small investment that provides substantial returns socially, environmentally and economically.

Weed control has proved particularly problematic at some scenic areas such as Lennox Headland, Boulders Headland, Ballina Headland, Black Head and Skennars Head, where cliff edges and other constraints create access and safety issues.

The use of abseils has proved successful at cliff sites but is prohibitively expensive. A recent quote for a five-year weed control program using abseiling bush regenerators at Lennox Headland, Boulders Headland, Ballina Headland, Black Head and The Serpentine amounted to \$583,000.

Other options include helicopter boom spraying and drone aerial spraying, however, past experience with helicopters has proved ineffective, whereas drone spraying is still in its infancy although may become an option in future.

The current financial model is insufficient to support a shire-wide sustainable program of weed control and bushland reserve management.

Such a program would seek to establish a shire-wide network of high-quality (i.e. low weed infested) bushland reserves which then require relatively minimal ongoing maintenance.

The lack of funding necessitates that works must be prioritized and targeted, often without the financial support to maintain them over the longer term.

This lack of funding has also resulted in increased community concerns and complaints regarding the poor and/or deteriorating condition of some bushland reserves.

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Budget Constraints

Based on these estimates, an overall sum of \$1,309,500 per annum would be needed to effectively manage all of Council's bushland reserves and weed control programs to preferred standards, albeit that not all reserves would need the same level of service.

The current budget allocates only \$11,000 for weed control and \$10,000 annually for bushland reserve management, although as noted below there are further expenditures.

Grants contribute significantly towards bushland reserve management, \$178,000 being the amount available during the 2015/16 financial year.

If you include the \$300,000 annual saving from volunteer groups, the budget shortfall is \$810,500.

Aside from this bushland reserves budget, an additional \$20,000 is currently provided from the roads budget specifically for roadside weed control. The Council also employs one staff member (our Natural Resources Officer) and the costs of this employment are not shown in the figures above.

It is important to note that this position is responsible for a wide range of activities and weed control and bushland management is only a portion of the activities undertaken by the position.

The above budget estimate does take account of Council's \$100,000 per annum contribution towards weed control projects undertaken by Far North Coast Weeds.

Currently, very little of this sum is spent on weed control on public land within Ballina Shire due to the manner in which noxious weeds are prioritized across the far north coast.

For example, despite Council considering Bitou Bush to be a problematic noxious weed in Ballina Shire, its classification as a class 4 weed by Far North Coast Weeds does not warrant a high enough priority to trigger their intervention.

The budget shortfall of \$810,500 is significant and highlights the inadequacy of the current funding model in delivering a sustainable program of weed control and bushland management across the Shire.

The current budget, together with grants and volunteer contributions represents only 38% of the amount required. Consequently, works must be prioritized and targeted.

With further development placing still more bushland and roadside vegetation under Council management, the situation is likely to deteriorate further in the absence of additional funding.

It is difficult to forward plan bush reserve maintenance and weed control programs with certainty when relying on opportunistic grant funding and/or volunteer programs. However, their contribution towards offsetting the budget is significant and should not be discounted.

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Further effort and funding might leverage still more grants, although additional opportunities are limited and may not yield significant additional returns.

A comparison between Ballina Shire Council, Lismore City Council and Byron Shire Council has been provided in the following table. This snapshot highlights the poor resourcing of Ballina Shire Council when compared to neighbouring Councils.

Ballina Shire	Lismore	Byron Shire
Reserves Under Management		
582 hectares	116 hectares (42 hectares under management)	400 hectares
Main Revenue Sources		
Council: \$11,000 – weed control \$10,000 – bushland reserve management \$20,000 – roadside weed control, drawn from roads budget Grants: \$178,000 – bushland reserve management	Council: \$500,000 per annum – being a 1.8 % special rate variation (LCC, 2013) to fund Council's biodiversity management strategy Grants: \$80,000 – bushland reserves management	Council: \$400,100 per annum (BSC, 2014) – being a 2.0 % special rate variation (2008) for an environmental levy to fund roadside vegetation management, biodiversity management, and related staff positions and activities Grants: \$3.6M – Koala habitat management (shared with Tweed Shire Council) \$65k – Graminoid clay heath restoration \$96k – Land for wildlife (coastal biodiversity hotspot) \$50k – Tweed-Byron Native Species Planting Guide (shared with Tweed Shire Council)
Programs (not exhaustive)		
National tree day World environment day Landcare support Bushfire hazard reduction Indian Myna control Chickiba Lakes bird roosting Coast road Lennox Head landslip rehabilitation Pine Avenue embankment rehabilitation/compensation Roadside weed control Bitou Bush management	Biodiversity management strategy Bushlands reserve management	National tree day World environment day Landcare support Indian Myna control Feral animal trapping Koala habitat management Roadside vegetation management Graminoid clay heath restoration Bitou Bush management Land for wildlife (coastal)

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Ballina Shire	Lismore	Byron Shire
Ballina Urban Garden Guide		biodiversity hotspot Tweed-Byron Native Species Planting Guide Flying fox monitoring Integrated vegetation management strategy
Staffing		
1 natural resource officer full-time	2 staff full-time	1 team leader full-time 1 ecologist full-time 3 bush regenerators part-time 1 project officer part time (koala grant funded)
Resources		
No vehicle	1 leaseback car 1 other car	1 leaseback vehicle 1 dual cab ute

Strategic Considerations

The following strategic considerations are pertinent to this report:

- The *Ballina Major Regional Centre Strategy 2015-2035* has a number of strategic actions relating to its environmental objectives:
 - Improve the management framework for the protection and enhancement of urban bushland.
 - Map key ecosystem attributes and services through the preparation of a Biodiversity Strategy.
- The *Ballina Shire Growth Management Strategy 2012* identifies the need for a shire-wide biodiversity management strategy, including vegetation mapping.

Sustainability Considerations

- **Environment**
Ballina Shire is rich in biodiversity, containing many high conservation value and high profile vegetation communities. Many exist along the coastline and adjacent to tourist drives.
- **Social**
The community aspires to a healthy natural environment, to maintain, protect & manage natural habitat areas (*People, Place, Prosperity: A Framework for a more sustainable Ballina Shire 2025*)
- **Economic**

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Degraded low-value (i.e. highly weed infested) bushland is disproportionately more expensive to manage than well maintained high-value (i.e. low-weed infested) bushland.

Legal / Resource / Financial Implications

Council has a legal requirement to remove and control various listed noxious weeds and also remove threats (weeds) to endangered ecological communities.

The Open Spaces and Reserves section is currently allocated a budget of \$21,000 per annum for weed control and bushland reserves management. An additional \$20,000 is allocated from the roads budget specifically for roadside weed control. These amounts are insufficient to enable vegetation management plans and other management actions to be implemented effectively.

A revised budget of \$810,000 would be required to implement a Shire-wide sustainable program of weed control and bushland reserve management.

Consultation

Relevant sections of Council have been consulted with regards to this report. Neighbouring Lismore City Council and Byron Shire Council were approached in order that comparisons could be made between respective budgets and resources.

Options

The size of the funding gap for this program is significant and having regard to all of the funding demands before Council, obviously addressing this issue is a major challenge and one the Council may wish to turn its mind towards in future strategic planning activities.

It is also noted that our neighbouring councils have used special rate variations to increase funding levels for this area of management and this might be an option to consider at an appropriate time. However, Council currently lacks a strategic-level document, notably a biodiversity management strategy, necessary to support the implementation of an environmental/biodiversity levy, and to underpin the case for a special rate variation.

Council does have a variety of environmental management plans that are used to source grant funds, however these are not considered sufficient for the above purpose.

In looking at a recommendation to this report the appropriate action is to raise this matter with the newly elected Council to determine whether they wish to pursue other fund raising measures, including the possibility of rate increases, to confirm the preferred level of service for Council.

Realistically this is the only option considering Council's comparatively low rate base to our neighbours and service levels are a matter that should be determined by the elected Council on behalf of the community.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That Council notes the contents of this report regarding Weed Control Funding.
2. That following the Local Government Elections, as part of the induction program, or any other activities reviewing Council's existing levels of service, the Council receive a briefing on the current levels of service for weed control and options to improve that level of service.

Attachment(s)

Nil