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Wild Matters
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To Whom it May Concern,

I appreciate the opportunity to comment on the National Established Weeds Priority (NEWP) Framework Version 3. I thank the team at "Wild Matters' for their polite and prompt responses to my queries.

I am an administrator for Letters for the Environment Central Australia (LECA). LECA's core activity is writing letters to people in positions of power and authority. Each month our group produces a 'case card' and 'letter writing tips' based on issues raised by local community members. I am also administrator for the Buffel Information and Action Group (https://www.facebook.com/groups/buffelgrass/).

The current federal governance arrangements for invasives species are problematic. They are skewed in favour of agriculture and other industry interests, rather than fidelity to the necessary and fundamental imperative of protecting biodiversity under the EPBC Act.

These consequences of undue industry influence are manifest in Central Australia. Timely action on Buffel grass which is opposed by the cattle industry has not happened. However lethal control of dingoes on cattle stations, which is supported by the cattle industry continues despite there being no evidence for the practice. Particularly concerning is that organisations like Centre for Invasive Species Solutions (CISS) appear to be enabling both practices and are not championing best practice.

This draft NEWP Framework is based on the unevidenced, ideology-driven standpoint that private industry delivery is the best and most agile way to deal with weeds. The Draft goes so far as to require that collaboration as a pre-requiste for a weed becoming a National Priority.

Accordingly I lack confidence that:

1. The NEWP Framework will improve weeds management in Australia
2. My comments will be properly considered.

For these reason I have included the Federal Office of the Auditor General and Minister for the Environment in my submission. I believe consideration under 18B of the Auditor General Act 1997 should be given to whether this framework:

1. can confidently assure legislated requirements for protection of threatened species
2. gives confidence that Australian Government investment serves the interests of the Australian public, not just agricultural and weed industry sectors, especially as it is not based on a transparent audit past performance and risks
3. is based on a thorough audit of the effectiveness and lost opportunities of past investment.

My views are significantly formed by my following experiences:

1. As a public health nurse communicable disease outbreaks are dealt with via strong legislation, regulation, government delivery, and sufficient resourcing.

In contrast, this strategy seeks co-leadership among stakeholders in industry, community and government. This is inappropriate when:

a. Some of these sectors may have a vested interest in inaction on certain weeds; and,
b. There are clear legislated expectations for weeds outcomes, in cases where they are listed as key threatening processes or threaten listed species under the EPBC Act.

2. I have lived in Central Australia since 1977. I have witnessed buffel grass transform the essential character of the landscape around Alice Springs. It has become at least the equal greatest invasive threat to biodiversity (in a shorter time than its rivals) and is ranked higher than any other environmental threat in terms of its social and cultural impacts for Aboriginal people.[1]
3. The deliberate planting and spread has continued unabated for one reason - it is valued by some pastoralists. This industry however contributes little to our economy[2].

Current governance structures have failed to abate this threat. This draft NEWP Framework appears to be building on these poor governance structures.

The proposed National Established Weed Action List (NEWAL) risks relegating the possibility of serious specific and comprehensive action on buffel under a designated weed specific strategy to generic, opportunistic short-term actions lumped in with other established weeds without a test for effectiveness. This isn't good enough. I strongly believe a forensic analysis of what went wrong in the failure to implement timely buffel grass abatement is needed.

A test for the NEWP and overarching governance structures should be whether it can stop buffel grass from continuing to be the greatest threat to biodiversity and culture in our region (and threatening much of mainland Australia). This should include being able to show that those with actual or perceived conflicts of interest were not allowed to delay or influence governance decisions.

Since this draft NEWP Framework was developed, there has been a change in the Federal Government. The new Government has a stated policy position that it intends to restore capability to the public service[3]. The draft NEWP Framework needs to be revisited in the light of the change of government to ensure it is consistent the new Government's stated priorities and takes advantage of any opportunities this brings.

In addition to these overarching comments, detailed comments are provided in the attached table.

Regards,

Jacqueline Arnold

Attachments

1. Table of detailed comments

Copies to

Auditor-General (Attention Mr. Grant Hehir, Australian National Audit Office)
Federal Minister for the Environment, Hon Tanya Plibersek

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[1] https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ece3.6724

[2] https://dpir.nt.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/505637/Outlook-Overview-2017.pdf (Cattle are about a 40% of the 2.7% contribution of agriculture to the Northern Territory gross state product)

[3] https://www.alp.org.au/policies/improve-the-public-service.

Attachment 1. Table: Detailed comments

DRAFT		COMMENT
Page	**Acknowledgements**	
i	The National Established Weed Priorities Framework was initiated through the Weeds Working Group of the Environment and Invasives Committee.	The Environment and Invasives Committee (EAIC), which is proposed to sponsor the NEWP, appears to be subordinate to the National Biosecurity Committee, which is primary industry dominated and private interest dominated (EAIC membership: https://www.awe.gov.au/biosecurity-trade/pests-diseases-weeds/pest-animals-and-weeds/eic#governance NBC Membership: https://www.awe.gov.au/biosecurity-trade/policy/partnerships/nbc/nbc-membership-list).) This arrangement does not inspire confidence that environmental concerns are given primacy. It is also unclear from the EAIC's terms of reference are adequate to ensure that measures needed to protect listed species under the EPBC Act are taken. Furthermore it includes observers that are predominately representatives of industry / private interests and frequently benefit from government contracts to deliver weeds initiatives, including development of this framework. (Director, Matt Sheenan is a Centre for Invasive Species Solutions (CISS) 'Project Leader', John Virtue's previous role was CISS Portfolio Director https://invasives.com.au/the-ciss-incursions-domain-software-tools-webinar/.) https://www.awe.gov.au/biosecurity-trade/pests-diseases-weeds/pest-animals-and-weeds/eic#governance There has been decreased transparency – meeting communiques have not been published since February 2020: https://www.awe.gov.au/biosecurity-trade/pests-diseases-weeds/pest-animals-and-weeds/eic#communiqus Membership of the EIC Weeds Working Group does not appear to be publicly available (I have contacted DAWE for this information and are awaiting a reply).

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	Funding support for its development was provided by the Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment.	This framework should be developed by the public service, not contracted. I believe the Auditor General should consider the evidence upon which this framework was developed and whether it can confidently assure weed management outcomes, including protection of EPBC listed species can be assured and it works in the interests of the Australian public as opposed to the agricultural sector. A strong focus on Government capacity would keeping with the new Government's stated position: https://www.alp.org.au/policies/improve-the-public-service
	The Framework was developed through workshops, meetings and written feedback with and by persons and organisations **involved** in established weed management across Australia. These contributions set the tone and intent for this Framework to be implemented as a long-term partnership between industry, government and community.	This suggests the consultation was primarily directed at those already 'inside the tent', excluding other interested parties who may have wished to be involved or have legitimate concerns which should have been considered This is a missed opportunity for valuable contributions to have been received. It also calls into question the legitimacy of the process. (In my case I was not aware of the process, until being indirectly informed by the group "gamba grass roots". I then made a lengthy submission on the earlier consultation draft of the framework but was not notified of the opportunity to comment on March iteration. In addition the consultation draft that I commented on was relatively impenetrable document, taking weeks to understand. I believe a more sophisticated consultation process was necessary, this should have involved surveys of attitudes to weeds management and outcomes amongst different demographics, been more heavily promoted and with multiple pathways to contribute.) All submissions and consultation reports should be published and made publicly available.
ii	**Foreword**	
	Weeds are one of the most frequently occurring, diverse and challenging land management issues in Australia. Whether you are growing a crop, restoring a natural landscape, running livestock, seeking bush tucker, maintaining a park or managing a waterway, weeds are likely to be a	This is focused too heavily on anthropocentric land use and values, rather than impact of weeds on the ecosystem as a whole.

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	prominent issue requiring ongoing control and preventative actions. This is a substantial burden on people's time, budgets, productivity, aspirations and legacy.	
	The Australian landscape and its native plants and animals are under ever increasing pressures as weeds invade new places, spurred on by major disturbances such as fire, flood and drought and a changing climate.	Major disturbance should include: • Agriculture – stock, cropping, transport. • Infrastructure – roads. Weeds adapt to controls that are poorly used, as evidenced by herbicide resistance.
	Weeds are resilient and adapt to frequently used controls, as evidenced through the rise of herbicide resistance. Knowledge on how to manage weeds and motivation to control them, **varies considerably amongst members of the community.**	Industry, government and community are differentiated / described elsewhere in the document. As such the line in bold should be changed to: "Varies considerably among land managers (industry, government and community) / varies considerably amongst members of industry, government and the community.
	The philosophy of the NEWP Framework is collaboration and co-leadership among stakeholders in industry, community and government. The Framework describes and guides the development of a long-term, national program for established weeds that is shaped by and developed for land managers of established weeds. It establishes governance and support to work together to determine and act upon Australia's established weed priorities.	Industry interference must be minimised and the concept of co-leadership on regulatory and policy matters of public interest, involving implementation of legislation is fundamentally flawed. I strongly recommend this document be referred to both the Australian Government Solicitor and the Auditor General. For-profit interests must not be given the same standing as public interests in federal governance. These level of inclusion and effective representation needs to be audited. The history for example, buffel grass in remote Aboriginal communities is that weeds policy has not served all interested parties equally (refer comment in covering letter).

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1	**NEWP Framework at a glance**	
	Vision	The vision is inadequate and does not give any assurance that weeds will be controlled to a prescribed standard. Collaboration must be led / mediated by government. It is simply unacceptable that there is no prescribed guidance on acceptable weed outcomes and volunteer community members are forced to "battle it out" with the agricultural interests for acceptable environmental outcomes. Clearly those with financial interests are more likely to have the backing powerful industry lobby groups and the financial and time resources to stay the course. This systemic problem has clearly held back action on buffel grass. In cases where there are conflicting priorities (e.g. industry vs community interests) these must be resolved through prioritisation of public interests not willingness of industry sponsors to pay
	Guiding Principles	See comment in section below
	Medium-term outcomes	Legislation and regulation needs to be strengthened to provide a framework, guidance and incentive for improved management. The Minister for the Environment should be able to veto weed management actions which do not adequately protect listed species or address landscape scale threats.
2-3	**Introduction**	
	Virtual weed Information Hub	Must be 'powered' / directly managed by the public service, not contracted / outsourced. The current 'Weeds Australia' https://weeds.org.au/ site, currently 'powered' by CISS should be managed directly by the federal department of environment – weeds branch. This is in keeping with the ALP position: https://www.alp.org.au/policies/improve-the-public-service

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		(The site does not include buffel grass though it is listed as a Key Threatening Process – novel biota and their impact on biodiversity under the EPBC Act, has a Federal Threat Abatement Plan and is arguably the greatest invasive threat to arid and semi-arid regions in Australia. I raised this issue through the 'feedback' portal on the CISS hub, we a awaiting a reply)
	Enablers	Include legislation and regulation
	Vision	Economic protection must be based on independent, comprehensive economic evaluation, not just costs and benefits to industry.
	Provide a conduit to **use-driven** research and development	Unnecessary and limiting to reduce the type of research to one model - 'use-driven'. <u>I am concerned that a "use-driven" research leads to the following issues:</u> • Use-driven research is vulnerable to capture by for-profit interests. • Even with strong regulatory oversight this model can easily devolve into profit-driven research • This increases potential for commercial values to lead to research bias. • Conflicts of interest created by commercialization may lead to biased reasoning or methodological choices in testing interventions. • In addition, such interests may lead research in directions that are unresponsive to pressing social or environmental needs, when it is profitable to do so. • Reinforces and refines existing "used" approaches, rather than encouraging innovation Leading to a problematic focus on • investigating herbicide use and neglect of other promising interventions such as biological control. E.g. The lack of research into well-known potential biological controls for buffel grass. • outcomes such as "registration a new herbicide or specific technology" (p.g. 17) that can be patented and post-marketing trials conducted Australia-wide.

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		I suggest alternatives models such as Problem-driven research, Academic-driven research, Theory-driven, Curiosity-driven research, Participant-driven research, Data-driven research should be considered and appropriately applied.
	National coordination	Must be led by governments, not contracted / outsourced. This is in keeping with the ALP position: https://www.alp.org.au/policies/improve-the-public-service
4	**Guiding Principles**	
	Priorities are shared and inclusive	Does not reflect the reality that industry and community priorities (e.g. profit vs cultural and environmental protection) are often diametrically opposed. Principles need to be realistic to be useful.
	This will be enabled by aligning with and partnering across existing strategies, frameworks and programs.	Starting with the EPBC Act review, existing strategies, frameworks and programs needs to be reviewed by the new government before this framework can be finalised.
	All weed-affected sectors within industry, community and government can equitably participate and benefit from the Framework.	Public interests should be prioritised.
	All threats are considered	
	All threats are assessed based on evidence, including those that may be considered beneficial to one sector and detrimental to another. As such the use of a plant does not preclude consideration of its impacts elsewhere as a weed.	If private benefits / profits from weeds result in public harms / costs. The private benefits should be discounted accordingly.

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	Resources are sustained	
	Long-term, sustained resourcing is required to successfully reduce the impacts of established weeds.	Resourcing should be reviewed regularly – it should not continue to be provided to programs / industry / organisations / corporations that are not meeting objectives.
	This includes ongoing opportunities to fund research and on ground control.	Is the NEWP concerned with 'funding of on ground control' or not (this is not clear in this draft)?
	Leadership guides investment and collaboration	Industry should not be permitted to lead / dominate governance, investment and collaboration. This is the role of government in a representative democracy.
	The NEWP Framework also aligns to and complements the principles outlined in the Australian Weeds Strategy[1] and the National Framework for the Management of Established Pests and Diseases of National Significance[2].	These require review. *They appear to have been captured by industry.*
5	**National Drivers**	
	Minimise the costs of weeds	
	Economic costs – evidence base	"Minimise the cost" should not be first on this list. The second and third drivers are necessary and so should be at the top of the list. The discussion is uneven because the cost of weeds to farming enterprises is quantified but the costs to biodiversity and loss of cultural values are not. This costing also neglects that weeds are frequently introduced by agriculture and the costs borne by other sectors. The weed management costs associated with weeds introduced and spread by agriculture should be shown as a cost of the agriculture sector not a cost to the agriculture sector.

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		A user pays model would seek to recover these externalised costs of weed introduction. This should be considered as an additional principle, where weed spread is a consequence of for profit activity.
	Reduce the social, cultural and amenity impacts of weeds "Weed control can be both physically and financially taxing, affecting the mental welfare of land managers."	Does 'land managers' include community volunteer groups such as Landcare?
	Build land manager skills, competency and capability for weed management	Include high turnover in public service.
	Manage weeds within broader land management and natural disaster contexts	Some weeds are major issues in urban (not limited to peri-urban) environments (e.g buffel grass invasion in Alice Springs) Exacerbation of other threats – imperative to explicitly include climate change in this section. https://invasives.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/fs_weedsandclimatechange.pdf
6	**Stakeholders**	
	Community	Important to clearly differentiate stakeholders and whether they have private / public interests.
	Local scale "Coordinated control of established weeds requires a tenure-neutral approach".	Different types of land tenure and the according different roles and responsibilities must be recognised at a local scale.
	Regional scale	Include environmental organisations
	State and Territory scale	Must fairly represent stakeholder interests. Environmental outcomes should be prescribed and not be able to be subordinated to primary industry concerns.

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	National scale	As the Australian Government is the 'primary stakeholder', the Australian public service should lead Invasive Governance. It should not be contracted / outsourced to other organisations.
7.	**Policy Context**	
		Existing frameworks need to be urgently reviewed under the new government.
7.	**What is an established weed**	
		No comment
8.	**Determining national weed priorities**	
	2. Feasibility of management intervention	This **must not** be used to exclude listing of weeds that meet criteria 1 and 3. By meeting these criteria, it is fundamentally important that weeds must be prioritised for action including RD&E. e.g. buffel grass This highlights the importance of: • not limiting research to –'use-driven research' • prioritising public interests e.g. research into potential biological solutions for buffel grass has not been conducted. This is apparently because the value of buffel grass to the arid and semi-arid pastoral industry has been prioritised over costs to the public and environment. https://archive.dpi.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/347153/buffel-grass-weed-management-guide.pdf The value of marginal operations that rely on buffel grass to Australia has not been established. As noted the relatively low economic contribution of the pastoral industry to the economy, especially in areas where buffel thrives puts a cap on its value, especially when set against the damage it causes.

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		Where there is conflict between industry and public levels of support, industry must be discounted. The statement "A further consideration is the level of socio-political support for addressing the impacts of the weed/issue through the proposed approach." Needs to be qualified with this consideration is to occur and be sign off at ministerial level. It is highly inappropriate for public servants and industry groups to make these trade-off decisions, especially given the skewed involvement of agricultural and weed management sector interests.
9	**Governance and Coordination**	
		These groups must be dominated by members who represent public interests (and the environment must be fairly represented), the current dominance of industry representatives is grossly inappropriate and is clearly contributing to abject failures in management of many established weeds. Observers should NOT be contractors who will benefit from outcomes / are in line for contracts (E.G CISS representative must not be observers on the EIC).
10	The Steering Group will have an independent chair	This chair must be not be associated in anyway with industry or contractors.
	Membership of the Steering Group will include balanced, national representation from government (Australian, State/Territory and Local), community (First Nations, biodiversity conservation, natural resources management, community volunteer groups), industry (agriculture, forestry, other industry and science sectors).	Membership should be weighed to favour public interests. The environment should be fairly represented. Industry that stand to profit from ongoing weed invasion / have vested interests in marketable 'solutions' should not be have equal influence. That's akin to proposing the tobacco industry be equally represented in governance decisions re tobacco control. It's setting Australia up to fail.

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	Members will have a solid understanding of weed management across Australia and the challenges posed by established weeds.	Members must be educated / supported so they can properly engage. This statement risks further empowering those in positions of power and excluding many interested parties.
	For legal, financial and executive officer purposes the Steering Group will require a host organisation.	These functions must sit with the executive branch of our government. They must not be contracted out.
	The Steering Group shall abide by principles of transparency, equity, diversity and accountability.	Membership of each group must be published. Meeting communiques must be published.
11	**NEWP delivery streams**	
		No Comment
12	**WoNS**	
	There are currently 32 WoNS. Further information can be found at weeds.org.au/weeds-profiles/.	CISS is not the proper institution to hold the contract for managing this site. It should be managed by the Federal department for environment.
14	**WoNs/WINS nomination and assessment**	
		Process used by the Threatened Species Scientific Committee to determine key threats is far superior, more in keeping with transparent democratic standards and accountability. https://www.awe.gov.au/environment/biodiversity/threatened/tssc It includes publication of nomination and opportunity for public comment
	1 **Expression of interest (EoI) submissions -** Nominees will lodge a confidential EoI, providing	Nomination must be published – as with threatened species / threatening process nominations

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	high level background information on their weed or issue and its impacts and distribution (potential and current). 2 **Facilitation of joint nominations** – Where similar EoIs are lodged, joint nominations will be encouraged. Support will be provided to connect nominees. 3 **Formal nomination process** – Nominees must complete a template, including WoNS or WINS screening questions, and provide evidence to support their nomination.	
	4 **Review of nominations** – An independent peer review of nominations will determine eligibility to progress to expert assessment.	A properly qualified scientific committee (akin to the threatened species scientific committee) directly employed by the government should lead this process.
	5 **Expert assessment** – The 'process lead' organisation (independent) will manage a technical assessment process involving a national expert panel of scientists and practitioners to elicit further information, score and rank weed species or issues. Assessment addresses the three EPDNS criteria.	This MUST sit with the government. It is inappropriate for this to be contracted to an external agency.
	6 **Independent review of assessments** – An independent peer review of the assessment process will occur for probity.	Why is this step required? Is the national expert assessment not trusted?
	7 **Selection of WoNS/WINS** – Assessment results and ranking of weed species/issues will be balanced with available resources to determine new WoNS and WINS.	This final decision should sit with the Minister for Environment

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15	**WINS**	
	Social, economic and/or institutional issues May include challenging environmental, economic, social or cultural issues, that whilst complex in nature, present opportunities to work across differing values, purposes or capacities to reduce weed impacts and spread. For example*, species that may impact on one sector, despite offering benefits to another; capacity or knowledge constraints in social and/or cultural contexts; managing weeds across multiple tenures/land uses.	Where a weed is claimed to offer benefits to one sector (e.g. buffel grass to the pastoral industry) these benefits must be weighed against public and environmental costs. In doing so equity (who benefits) and rights (e.g. Non exclusive native title holders have rights to enjoy the utility of their homelands even under pastoral lease) and legislation (net economic benefit does not override legal commitments to not do harm). For example, it would be ludicrous to attempt to address buffel grass invasion in conservation and Aboriginal lands while neighbouring pastoralists leasing public lands continue to plant and spread it.
16	Elicit support, willingness and motivation amongst community and industry stakeholders to act.	Lack of support, willingness and motivation amongst stakeholders to act is not a valid reason to not address a weed issue. In cases such as these legislation and regulation is required to ensure public interests are served and the environment is protected. *This sounds like nothing has been learned from inaction on climate change*.
17	**NEWAL**	
	e.g. registration of a new herbicide	How does this require national coordination? Isn't this the responsibility of the manufacturer?
18	[+]The NEWP Steering Group includes an independent Chair and National Weed Management Facilitator as Executive Officer. * An independent organisation appointed to conduct the WINS and/or WoNS selection processes for the NEWP Steering Group.	*This MUST sit with the government. It is inappropriate for this to be contracted to an external agency.

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19	**Virtual Weed Information Hub**	
		This MUST be managed by the Federal department for environment. CISS is not the proper institution to hold the contract for curating and managing this site, this is properly done by an organisation unable to materially benefit from the information presented or not presented.
20	**Measure of success**	
	Program Logic	Current logic model does not adequately describe the relationship between inputs, outputs and outcomes.
	As on-ground control is not a direct outcome of the Framework's delivery streams it cannot be monitored, evaluated or reported on in a meaningful way against the Framework itself.	If the process only is to be the program logic must be revised to reflect this. The following 'Long-term Outcomes' need to be removed from the program logic: • Tools and knowledge are contributing to strategic, landscape-level spread prevention and impact reduction programs for established weeds. • The entry, spread and impacts of priority established weeds outside core distributions are averted through ongoing prevention, outlier eradication and containment activities. • Where priority established weeds are widespread, the economic, environmental, social and cultural impacts are substantially reduced
		On page 3 it is stated that the NEWP Framework is not intended to provide a funding source for on-ground control actions. Therefore the following medium term outcome must be removed from the program logic: • Increased investment in on-ground management of established weeds. The M&E plan will therefore focus on how the NEWP Framework delivery streams: leverage funding for on-ground works or research and innovation that improves on-ground outcomes.
21	**Reporting**	
		More specificity needed to be able to comment