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Report 02.264

16 May 2002

File: Y/15/3/1

Report to the Rural Services and Wairarapa Committee
from Wayne O'Donnell, Manager, Biosecurity

Pest Plant Control – Wellington City Programme

1. Purpose

To request the Committee, as the Management Agency for the Regional Pest Management Strategy, to consider a review of pest plant control under the Wellington City Programme.

2. Background

Prior to the Council taking responsibility for the enforcement of the Noxious Plants Act in 1989, Old Mans Beard (OMB) was not classified a noxious plant in Wellington City. At that time the degree of infestation was such that the former Noxious Plants Council considered the species beyond control within the City. OMB had been a classified noxious plant over the remainder of the Region since the mid 1980's.

To gain uniformity and to satisfy increasing public pressure, and the concerns of adjacent city councils, the Regional Council, with the agreement of the Wellington City Council, applied for classification in 1991. The Noxious Plants Council approved the application in 1992.

The Regional Council then developed a city-wide inspection programme in 1993, with the aim of eventually eradicating OMB. Individual property inspections commenced in the northern suburbs with landowners required to totally control the species. At that time it was considered that initial inspections over the entire City would be completed within seven years. Within two years, two fixed term staff worked on the programme with a supervisor contributing 50% of his time.

3. Regional Pest Management Strategy Influence

Following the implementation of the Regional Pest Plant Management Strategy in 1996, staffing levels increased to three fixed term with a higher level of supervision. This followed the inclusion of the pest plant species Wild Ginger and Cathedral Bells in the inspection programme.

Unfortunately, and despite the increase in resources, it was becoming obvious that eradication of OMB was not an achievable goal in the medium term. The extent of maintenance inspections to ensure total control over an increasing area, plus the additional work on new species, effectively stopped progress into new areas. In 1999, the Council agreed to cease annual re-inspections of all maintenance areas in favour of a limited number of random inspections throughout the total surveyed area. The level of service delivery permitted was also increased up to a maximum of 20 minutes per property during initial inspections. This change was implemented to ensure small infestations were adequately controlled, thereby minimising future maintenance input requirements.

4. Progress Under The New RPMS 2002-2021

Following the inclusion of additional pest plants in the Wellington City Programme (WCP) under the new 2001-2021 RPMS, staffing levels were increased to four, and the positions made permanent. The role of the supervisor is now almost full time.

The aim of the WCP, as stated in the RPMS, is *to minimise the spread and the adverse environmental impacts of Banana Passionfruit, Cathedral Bells, Climbing Asparagus, Old Man's Beard and Wild Ginger within Wellington City.*

Random maintenance inspections have permitted an increase in initial inspections. Currently, approximately one half of the City has been surveyed. (refer to Appendix 1).

Since the inception of the programme, a total of 3,650 OMB sites have been identified and cleared during initial inspections in the surveyed area. A further 2,117 sites have been managed following complaints from other parts of the City. In the 2000/01 financial year, a total of 808 Wild Ginger and 138 Cathedral Bell infestations were also located.

Most of the City not yet surveyed has a very high level of OMB infestation with an estimated 50-60% of properties affected. Some suburbs are likely to have infestations affecting over 70% of properties.

5. Landowner Resistance

There is growing resistance by landowners to undertake control. It is now not uncommon for some infestations to cost thousands of dollars to clear. Increasingly, property owners are questioning the relevance of the programme, particularly as it moves further from the City's Green Belt and other significant environmental areas. It is also becoming common for landowners to resist undertaking control on one or more of the listed species when major infestations of blackberry, gorse and other nuisance plants remain.

The high levels of infestation have necessitated an increase in the extent of enforcement activities. Considerable staff time is now being allocated to correspondence, title searches, and re-inspections.

Unfortunately, it is becoming all too clear that landowners are not undertaking effective control. The result being that the infestation is similar within 1-2 years. This fact is supported by the outcomes of the 2001/02 random maintenance inspection programme where 73% of properties visited had active infestations.

It is important to note, however, that landowners were supportive when Council staff provided the clearance service. Currently, this function is limited to small infestations that can be controlled within the 20 minute limit.

6. Staffing Issues

There has been a high turnover of staff working on the WCP. Twelve staff have resigned since the commencement of the programme. Three of the four current staff have recently tendered their resignations. The main concerns appear to be a mix of the following –

- the nature of the work with many residents being reluctant to undertake control
- increasing enforcement requirements
- amount of paperwork involved
- general dissatisfaction with the purpose of the programme

Furthermore, staff have noted the growing lack of interest and resistance of property owners, and the increasing level of infestation in areas still to be surveyed. They question the need to enforce clearance on residential properties as the programme moves further from major indigenous bush reserves in need of protection. Many of these sites are currently included in the KNE programme but to date have only had possum control undertaken.

There is also a growing belief that the inadequate level of occupier maintenance control makes the programme objectives ultimately unachievable.

7. Future Options

An enforced pest plant control project of this scale has never been attempted in NZ before. Increasing difficulties at this half way stage suggest it is time to review the project. A review will need to include a formal public consultation process, as any change would constitute an amendment to the RPMS.

Wellington City Council would need to be closely involved in the consultation process as any change could have consequences for their reserve protection programmes.

The budget for the 2001/02 WCP is \$212,000. Various options have been considered for re-investment of these funds within Wellington City and elsewhere –

- protect areas of ecological significance. These could be areas selected by the KNE prioritisation process that currently only receive possum control. Buffer zones would be created where all control work was undertaken by Council staff. Under this option, a large percentage of the existing surveyed area would remain protected.
- Continue with the current WCP but arrange for all infestations to be controlled by contractors or WRC staff. This change would ensure that control was undertaken to a high standard. Enforcement actions would not be required. Maintenance work would be significantly less. However, there still remains a doubt about the benefits of this approach.
- All future actions to be based on complaint. This approach aligns with the objectives of the RPMS, as properties clear of pest infestations are afforded protection. Under this option, enforcement requirements remain, as infestation levels in the unsurveyed areas are generally very high.
- Allocate staff to specific areas of the City. Staff would organise the protection of KNE in these areas and act on complaint for remaining areas. A close relationship with WCC and community groups would be promoted.
- A mix of all the above options.

After a year of working under the new RPMS, it has become clear that we do not have sufficient resources to annually manage all the Eradication Category species. Landowners have been reporting more infestations as they become better informed via Council publications, field days and media reports. An option would be to utilise some of the WCP funds if any became available following amendment to the programme.

8. Communications

Wellington City Council representatives will be invited to discuss any proposed changes to the Wellington City Programme. It is important that we seek to align our respective resources, where possible, to maximise potential benefits.

Any proposed amendments to the WCP will require a public consultation process in accordance with the Biosecurity Act 1993.

9. Recommendation

- (1) *That the Committee appoint members to Regional Pest Management Strategy Sub-Committee to consider the future of the Wellington City Programme.*
- (2) *That the Regional Pest Management Strategy Sub-Committee report a preferred position to the Committee at the 20 August 2002 meeting.*

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