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invasive species council

Submission to

Discussion paper:
Modernising Australia's approach to established pests and diseases of national significance

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Introduction

The Invasive Species Council thoroughly endorses the underpinning concepts of national coordination and collaboration. But some of the principles and statements in the paper ring alarm bells, for they flag a narrow role for governments and offer biased and poorly justified criteria for selecting nationally significant invasive species. And without the all-important discussion about funding and information about implementation, we cannot assess its real potential.

Does this paper signify an exciting new era with nationally coordinated, well-planned, collaborative, innovative efforts to protect biodiversity from the most harmful invasive species – or does it presage a government retreat from all but a few popular causes? We fear that environmental threats will mostly be neglected under this framework.

1. The proposed framework

Here is a brief summary of what we understand of the proposed framework.

To be deemed 'nationally significant', a pest or disease must be established and beyond eradication. It 'would be likely to have far reaching and/or national impacts', and controlling it must be in the national interest.

A plan or strategy would be developed for each nationally significant pest or disease. The focus would be on asset protection as 'a shared responsibility between landholders, community, industry and government', with governments giving greatest priority to 'supporting industry and community leadership and actions'. Regulation would be minimised in favour of collaboration. By supporting community and industry activity in responding to significant established pests and diseases, governments will be able to focus more on other aspects of biosecurity such as prevention.

2. International obligations should drive action

Under the proposed scheme, a pest or disease that has 'significant impacts on the natural environment and ecosystems' can qualify as nationally significant.

It would be beneficial to have a systematic approach to identifying and listing significant invasive species. But because there is no method for translating environmental benefits into dollars, we may find the 'national interest' test is harder to meet for threats to the environment than for those to trade or agriculture. This is a common problem across many biosecurity programs, and often leads to environmental neglect. The paper says that there won't be national action when the costs of implementation exceed the benefits. But how do we compare implementation costs measured in dollars with benefits measured in species or ecological communities protected?

The recent Senate inquiry into environmental biosecurity recognised this problem, and recommended 'the Commonwealth Government work with state and territory governments to

develop a nationally consistent methodology for incorporating environmental impacts into cost-benefit analyses under the National Environmental Biosecurity Response'. This is essential for all biosecurity decision-making that relies on cost-benefit analyses.

Clearly, Australia's list of invasive species with significant national environmental impacts is very long. But will the governments consider there is a strong national interest in controlling those threatening the environment? What the paper neglects to include in the national interest test is Australia's international and national obligations to do so. It should be in Australia's national interest to meet its obligations under the Convention on Biological Diversity and to achieve the objects of our national environmental laws. The 2011 Aichi targets under the convention include one to control or eradicate priority invasive species.

Recommendations

- *Include Australia's international obligations to protect biodiversity in the national interest test, and give high national priority to arresting and reversing biodiversity decline.*
- *Implement the recommendation by the Senate inquiry into environmental biosecurity to develop a nationally consistent methodology for incorporating environmental impacts into cost-benefit analyses.*

3. National significance should not be a popularity contest

We know that governments are not prepared to spend the money to address all invasive species threats that could be deemed nationally significant, so how will priorities be determined? The paper implies it will be by popularity. Governments will 'provide support where sustained collective action to manage an established pest or disease by an industry or community exists'.

This would strongly bias selection of nationally significant species to those in well-populated areas (where collective action is feasible) and to popular causes rather than biodiversity-based priorities. Cane toads would undoubtedly qualify but probably not most invasive invertebrates, or weeds and feral animals in remote areas. Many control programs – such as invasive ants requiring bait treatment and large-scale feral vertebrate control – rely mainly on government action and are not readily amenable to community-led action. Conflict species such as feral deer or horses or species with economic benefits such as feral goats may also be rejected. This focus is likely to bias selection to agricultural priorities because industry has a much greater capacity – including resources – to undertake collective action.

Recommendation

- *Priority should go to managing species with the greatest threats or potential threats to biodiversity. Government action for the environment should not rely on there being existing community action.*
- *Ensure that decision-making about nationally significant species is transparent, informed by expert environmental knowledge and opinion, and consultative.*

4. It is in the national interest to learn as we go

There is also the risk that the national interest test will stymie action on difficult species, due to the requirement that action be 'feasible and practical'. Often effective control measures can only be developed and improved through a dedicated long-term program. Australia has become a leader in ant control only because of sustained government programs on Christmas Island for yellow crazy ants and in southeast Queensland for red imported fire ants, which have fostered new techniques. Learning by trial and error should be facilitated and research should be given high priority.

There is too little in the paper about research. It is not mentioned in the policy principles. Supporting research is mentioned as one of the roles of government 'when a strong public interest exists to do so'. There is also no mention of training or extension in the paper.

Recommendation

- *Recognise that the national interest can best be served in many cases by committing to learn through action. Governments should commit to research on control methods for significant threats rather than requiring (in a catch 22 situation) they be already available before there is national action.*

5. We should learn from existing approaches

Australia already has processes for identifying and coordinating action on some nationally significant invasive threats – through the development of threat abatement plans under the EPBC Act and the Weeds of National Significance program. The paper does not make clear how the proposed process will interact with the existing ones. Is the intention to expand, replace or modify these existing programs? It is strange how little mention they get in the discussion paper.

At the very least the merits and inadequacies of existing national programs should be reviewed so that we can learn from them and maintain approaches that have worked well.

It is concerning that the paper claims the proposed new approach would 'represent a significant change' for it is not made clear how it would improve on existing approaches. There are many aspects of existing programs that are worth maintaining but the section entitled 'What would change', does not suggest the 'significant change' will be directed at weaknesses of current programs. It reinforces our concerns that governments will abandon or not take action on environmental threats that seem difficult, have benefits that are hard to quantify, or lack or are not amenable to community-led action. Does it also mean the abandonment or neglect of existing programs?

Recommendations

- *Review the existing programs that deal with nationally significant threats, including the KTP and TAP process under the EPBC Act and the WoNS program to assess how they can be improved to achieve an optimal approach to identifying and managing nationally significant pests and diseases.*

- *Consult early and widely to develop the most effective processes for identifying and managing nationally significant threats.*

6. Containment is an important goal

The discussion paper identifies four categories of response to invasive species – prevention, eradication, containment and asset-based protection – but it specifies in the policy principles that only the last of these will be applied to nationally significant species. This is far too narrow a focus.

Most invasive species (including most weeds) in Australia have yet to achieve their full potential range, and there will be substantial environmental benefits in containing them and preventing further spread. One example is prickly acacia, a weed of national significance in north Queensland, for which the approach has been to remove outlying populations and contain it in core areas of infestation. Even if spread of an invasive species will inevitably occur, there can be great benefits in delaying it to allow the development of better control measures. The paper implies that governments will allow nationally significant invasive species to spread and focus their efforts only on protecting assets (eg. certain sites or species) from their impacts.

Recommendation

- *Add containment as a policy principle for species yet to reach their full range.*

7. We need government leadership and genuine collaboration

There is a worrying absence of the notion of government leadership. The paper says that governments should take the lead on eradication programs but leadership is not one of the roles of government in managing nationally significant pests and diseases.

The vision informing this paper seems to be of community groups out there diligently controlling invasive species with the government in the background offering support. This might work for agricultural threats that can be controlled on-farm but is completely unrealistic for most high priority environmental threats, especially those in sparsely populated areas or for invasive species yet to spread to their potential range.

Effective management requires governments to take a leadership role on many nationally significant threats to the environment.

Instead of leadership, the paper promotes the idea of collaboration. However, we fear that it is a limited form of collaboration, focused mainly on on-ground actions. The paper does not specify a substantial role in most biosecurity policy- and decision-making on nationally significance species.

There is no commitment in the paper to a transparent process involving the community sector for determining nationally significant pests and diseases and developing the plans or strategies for listed species. The paper says that four government committees (the Invasive Plants and

Animals Committee, the Plant Health Committee, the Animal Health Committee and the Marine Pest Sectoral Committee), mostly made up of representatives from agricultural departments, will consider potential candidate species. Helping identify such species is listed as one role of industry and community groups but the process is not explained.

Recommendations

- *Add leadership to the list of government roles and responsibilities.*
- *Commit to genuine collaboration with the community in developing policies and making decisions on nationally significant invasive species, not just with on-ground work.*

8. Environmental threats on private land need to be managed

The proposal to focus only on threats for which there is sustained collective action implies that environmental threats that exist mainly on private land will be neglected, for there are major constraints on community action on private tenures. The majority of land in Australia is used for agriculture, and many species and ecological communities threatened by invasive species exist mainly or exclusively on private land from which the community is excluded.

Where invasive species on private land have both economic and environmental impacts e.g. with rabbits, rubber vine, prickly acacia, blackberry, there is some motivation for landholders to manage the impacts. This is not the case for species with predominantly environmental impacts, except for landholders with a strong conservation ethic (one reason why feral cats are such a major threat). .

The paper says that landholders are responsible only for managing nationally significant invasive species that impact on their assets (or those of other landholders) or those they are required to manage by regulation. This means landholders have no responsibility to manage nationally significant invasive species (or other invasive species) that don't affect their assets unless required by regulation. Lacking is any notion of a duty of care for the environment. Combined with the intention to reduce regulation, and the restriction of nationally significant listings to those species for which there is already collection action, this implies that there will be very little coordinated action for high impact invasive species on private land that mainly affect the environment .

Recommendation

- *Recognise that the public interest requires management of environmental pests and diseases on private lands and that government intervention (including regulation) will be required to address these threats on private lands.*
- *Include in the roles and responsibilities of landholders a duty of care to protect environmental assets, as well as assets of value to them, from nationally significant and other invasive species.*

9. There is an important role for regulation and enforcement

We are concerned by the strong emphasis in the paper on minimising regulation, with a policy principle to minimise 'enforcement intervention'. Poor enforcement is often the norm for environmental threats, so any suggestion that it should be reduced or restricted to invasive species for which there is existing community action is worrying.

Relying on regulation to the 'minimum extent necessary' is also likely to undermine prevention and containment of species for which there is limited information about impacts.

Recommendation

- *Acknowledge that regulation and enforcement are important tools in managing invasive species threats, particularly on private land where landowners often have no other incentives to manage environmental threats.*

10. What about funding and implementation?

A cynic would interpret the government wish to avoid a leadership role as its desire to limit public funding. The paper implies that government funding will be available only as a top-up to existing resources, invested 'where they can add the most value', and where community or industry groups are already active.

There is no acknowledgement of the current critical underfunding for managing threats to biodiversity and no commitment to increase funding.

There is also a strange statement in the paper that 'asset-based management may be the most cost-effective for an individual and/or as the basis for collective action by a community or industry'. This suggests that containment is neglected in the paper because governments want individuals and groups to bear most of the management costs and containment requires more government involvement. Containment will often be the most cost-effective approach for managing environmental threats but the paper implies that public funding will be too limited for containment programs.

Although the paper proposes a national plan or strategy for each invasive species deemed nationally significant, there is no information on how they will be implemented. The implementation of the first 20 strategies for weeds of national significance worked well when there were government funds for a coordinator and national committee, but this stopped when funding ceased. The strategic plans for 12 new weeds of national significance, approved in 2012, lack national coordination necessary to drive implementation. The implementation of threat abatement plans under the EPBC Act is mostly very limited, due in part to a lack of resources for coordination.

The need for public funding is greatest for environmental threats where there is no commercial incentive on private land to control particular invasive species. Public funds are already directed to controlling environmental threats on private lands, such as through the former Caring for our

Country program and Landcare, but the allocation of these funds is often poorly directed and unstrategic. There will need to be careful consideration of how to improve the targeting of public funds to manage nationally significant environmental pests and diseases. Longer-term funding commitments are needed.

The paper talks of the need to maximise public benefit from public funding. There should be a review of current funding that is primarily for private benefit in managing invasive species. While public funding for public good research is declining, the Australian government currently matches industry levies for research including on biosecurity threats to agriculture, thus providing substantial funds to established pest management for private benefits. According to the principles espoused in the paper this funding should be redirected to neglected areas that are in the public interest, including research on environmental threats. Without an explicit commitment to do this, we remain sceptical that governments are serious about directing public funds to optimise public benefits.

Recommendations

- *Review public funds provided for invasive species research and management that is primarily for private benefit and apply a public benefits test to all such funding.*
- *Commit to substantially increase funding for research and management (including for containment) of nationally significant invasive species threats to the environment.*
- *Align the investment of public funds for the management of nationally significant environmental pests and diseases on private lands with their respective action plans.*
- *Commit to funding for coordinating the implementation of plans and strategies for managing nationally significant pests and diseases.*

11. Develop processes to identify risk creators

The intention to compel action by risk creators, such as to assist with control efforts or minimise their risk, is laudable but rarely occurs despite long-held intentions to do so.

Risk creators are often hard to identify and motivating action will require regulations or incentives. . It is unlikely to happen unless there are specific processes to identify risk creators and motivate responsible behaviours.

Recommendation

- *Develop processes to identify risk creators and review the best methods (regulatory and incentives) to motivate risk creators to take responsibility.*

12. Additional comments on the text:

Following are a few additional comments on the text of the discussion paper.

Background:

It is essential to include information about the weeds of national significance program in the background as it is easily the largest effort to date within the context of the proposal.

More generally, such a significant development in the national coordination of the management of established pests is barely mentioned.

Current arrangements:

Paragraph 2, first sentence – It is assumed that this sentence refers to "on-ground" management and this should be made clear. Management of established pests includes research, extension, training, legislation, policy, enforcement and funding, where parties such as all three levels of government, RDCs, chemical companies, catchment committees, etc have a role. The paper does not recognise this full breadth of activities and the parties involved.

Maximising returns from biosecurity investments:

- "Privately owned" needs to be "privately owned or leased" and include as examples land and water including marine waters; built structures should be listed as including water supply dams and ports. Very significant assets are involved.
- Government managed land and water - all land and waters that are not "privately owned or leased" are managed by one of the three levels of government, including by government owned corporations. This needs to be added. This is where action will be taken to support the purpose of the agency. In some cases it will be a broad public good eg pests on National Parks, coastal fringes, parks and gardens. Management of some water bodies benefits the agency in water management at the same time supporting recreational activities. In other cases there may be a narrower public good eg limited control on weeds on main roads.
- The second dot point under 'asset-based protection' does not make sense. Public health is not an asset.
- Figure 1: For containment and asset-based protection there is a high return on investment from research, especially research involving biological controls.

Proposed roles and responsibilities:

- Government – government as a land manager should be removed from here and included under landholders. This section should focus only on government's role in legislation, research, coordination, etc. The role for addressing public good on private land needs to be considered and added.
- Industry and community groups – This would be better separated into two groups as one is largely private benefit and the other is largely for public benefit. Need to add prevention, early detection and control to support "containment".
- Landholders – Need to add prevention, early detection and control to support "containment", not just on-ground control.