

NESSI NEWSLETTER Providing land management information to the community.



Summer/Autumn 2009

EDITION 38

Welcome to a combined Summer and Autumn edition of the NESSI newsletter for north east Victoria. The consequences of the February 2009 fires across the region are on-going. Staff are busy catching up on projects after being involved in fire suppression as well as fire recovery activities. This has delayed our usual print run of NESSI. So we have packaged up our summer information into this combined edition. We trust it is useful to you.

It has been an extra troubling season for those people affected by the fire in the Beechworth area. While for others the combined impact of the current drought and economic woes is making property management decisions really difficult. Now is a great time to take a step back and consider your property management options. In particular, we encourage all people to have a documented whole farm plan (with a clear action plan) that is well thought out. It needs to consider your whole farming system covering productivity, sustainability and biosecurity issues.

If you are looking for fire recovery/response or drought information check out the DPI website as a starting point. <http://www.dpi.vic.gov.au/dpi/index.htm>

The drought continues across the region but we are hopeful that the late April rain we enjoyed will be the start of a good season. It's been a long time between drinks so we can't wait to watch it happen.

Peter O

Update on 2008 Tree Planting.

I recently visited a number of sites that were planted in July and August 2008. This was so I could look at the survival rates at different sites and see if there were any lessons to be learnt. I was surprised to find that some sites not only had higher than 80% survival rate, but also had a very vigorous growth rate. In comparison there were sites with less than 20% survival. These areas were often not ripped, had poor soils or climatic conditions were just too harsh. Some of the things to consider if you are planting or replacing losses:

- If possible rip the ground where trees are to be planted.
- Undertake weed control prior to planting.
- Maintain fences and keep the stock out for at least 5 years.
- Control rabbits and if rabbits continue to be a problem use tree guards.
- Plant in late winter not spring.

Picture: One example of a tree more than 1m in height, only nine months after planting. Even in the currently climatic conditions tree planting can be successful.

Kylie Macreadie



Tallangatta Expo

DPI and DSE staff recently promoted the wide range of information and services that they offer to landholders, at the farm and water expo at Tallangatta. Landholders had the opportunity to talk to staff about issues such as weeds, wild dog, animal health, farm planning, fisheries, drought, native vegetation, irrigation and farm water supplies. The children's section was also enjoyed by the local school students and included a visit from Daisy the cow, with each student taking home a tree to plant.



Editor: Kylie Macreadie

A Mother's Day gift that may just keep on giving

In May 2008, several large plant retailers inadvertently stocked and sold Mexican feather grass (*Nassella tenuissima*) as part of a Mother's Day promotion. Since the detection of the invasive exotic grass by an off duty DPI staff member in Gippsland, investigations by the Department of Primary Industries (DPI) have revealed that as many as 4000 Mexican feather grass plants may have been supplied to stores from January to May 2008.

So why is Mexican feather grass so dangerous?

If you thought Australian native plants were at the top of the class when it comes to coping with heat and drought, then think again. Mexican feather grass is a very hardy, highly aggressive competitor and is considered a far greater risk for Australia than its close weedy relative serrated tussock (*Nassella trichotoma*). In fact, Mexican feather grass is capable of invading up to 14 million hectares of land if adequate detection and eradication measures are not undertaken. To make matters worse, Mexican feather grass is unpalatable to stock and very difficult to control.

Reflecting the serious threat from this invasive grass, *Nassella tenuissima* is declared under the *Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994* as a State prohibited weed. State prohibited weeds either do not occur in Victoria, or, as in this case, it is present but it is reasonable to expect it can be eradicated from the state. There are 25 declared State prohibited weeds, which are the highest risk weeds in the state. DPI is committed to preventing the introduction of new high risk weeds to Victoria and protecting our environment and the economy.

Where were the plants being sold?

Plants were stocked and sold by retail chain stores Big W and Bunnings Warehouse throughout metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria, including; Albury, Wangaratta, Shepparton and Echuca. Complicating the issue was the mislabelling of plants that occurred at the various wholesale nurseries, prior to their supply at retail stores. Suspected Mexican feather grass plants could have been sold under the following names: *Stipa capillata*, *Stipa lessingiana*, *Stipa capriccio*, *Stipa* Regal Sensations or Summerhill.



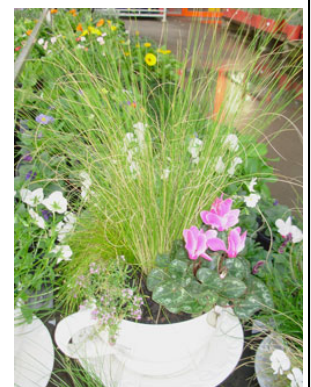
The feathery appearance of a Mexican feather grass seed head



Mexican feather grass sold as Bunnings Regal Sensations - *Stipa capillata*



Young Mexican feather grass from the Big W Mother's Day Promotion



Bunnings Warehouse Mothers Day promotion - teacup.

How many plants have been retrieved in Victoria so far?

DPI operations have already managed to recover 7,101 plants from wholesalers, retail stores and private gardens across Victoria. Of most significant importance for our region was a Wodonga backyard, detected as having an infestation of Mexican feather grass. An inspection by DPI Officers revealed eight very large, mature Mexican feather grass plants in full seed in the garden. Closer inspection revealed that the grass had already spread into nearby pot plants via wind-blown seeds and was also spreading throughout the adjoining lawn area. In another case, plants were found growing on a dam bank on a farm south of Benalla. The plants in both cases were removed and destroyed by DPI Officers, and repeat visits will be undertaken to ensure total eradication.

How do you identify a Mexican feather grass plant?

Mexican feather grass is a densely tufted perennial tussock grass that grows to about 70cm high. It is similar in appearance to serrated tussock, but it's distinguished by the flower and seed head. Mature plants form seed on a long flower spike. Seeds have a small pointed tip (head) and a long bent awn (tail) and resemble a large feather when clumped together at the end of a flower stem. The leaves of Mexican feather grass are needle-like and roll smoothly between the fingers; whereas many native grasses have flat leaves that clunk when rolled between the fingers (see images below).

What should you do if you think you have found a Mexican feather grass plant?

Firstly, please don't attempt to control or dispose of the weed yourself. If you think you have purchased or seen a Mexican feather grass plant, please contact Stuart Robertson at DPI Wodonga on (02) 6043 7965. If in doubt, please report the sighting - it is far better to be safe than sorry with this weed menace. The responsibility for eradication of State prohibited weeds rests with DPI, who also bear the costs of treatment and monitoring of infestation sites.

Want more information?

Please call the Customer Service Centre on 136 186 or visit the DPI Weed Spotter website for updates on Mexican feather grass at: <http://www.dpi.vic.gov.au/weedspotters>

Development of Waterway Action Plans for Yackandandah Creek, Upper King River and Snowy Creek

The North East Catchment Management Authority is continuing to produce Waterway Action Plans for targeted areas identified in the North East Regional River Health Strategy (2005). The next Waterway Action Plans are planned for Yackandandah Ck, Upper King River and Snowy Ck. The Waterway Action Plans will subsequently identify management strategies and actions to address the threats identified within each reach.

King River Waterway Action Plan

The project area for this Waterway Action Plan extends from Lake William Hovell downstream approximately 24km to Gentle Annie Lane, Whitfield. The project area includes the townships of Cheshunt and Whitfield and falls within the Rural City of Wangaratta's Local Government Area. Three major tributaries flow into the King River in the project area, namely the King River West Branch at Cheshunt South, Stony Creek at Cheshunt and Station Creek at Whitfield.

This project focuses on the threats and actions that impact on the health of the King River. From a physical perspective, this includes the land directly influenced by the river within the channel, the near bank riparian zone and the floodplain.

The aims of this Waterway Action Plan (WAP) are to investigate and address:

- Infestations of exotic flora, including willow (*Salix*) species, which impact on the ecology of the riparian zone and geomorphology of the river
- Impacts of the 2006/07 bushfires on river health, including in-stream habitat, riparian vegetation and water quality
- Potential for future channel avulsions and scour of the floodplain, as a result of current land use and management of the floodplain
- Water quality concerns raised by the local community.

Yackandandah Creek Waterway Action Plan

The North East Catchment Management Authority is in the preliminary stages of developing a Waterway Action Plan for the Yackandandah Creek between the Yackandandah - Dederang Road and the Kiewa River.

The project focuses on the threats and actions that impact on the health of Yackandandah Creek. From a physical perspective, this includes the land directly influenced by the creek within the channel, the near bank riparian zone and the floodplain.

The aims of this Waterway Action Plan (WAP) are to investigate and address:

- The source and transportation of sediment within the study area.
- Assess the feasibility of eradicating exotic weeds (blackberry, willow etc.) from the system.

Snowy Creek Waterway Action Plan

The Snowy-Lightning Creek system is a sub-catchment of the Mitta Mitta River. The WAP development is to take a whole of catchment approach. The catchment is predominantly made up of State Forest with agricultural and tourism land use activities and National Parks also represented.

The aims of this Waterway Action Plan (WAP) are to investigate and address:

- The impacts of fish barriers on fish passage to Snowy Creek and the Mitta Mitta River.
- Conduct an assessment of the threats to water quality from the catchment.
- Assess the feasibility of eradicating exotic weeds (blackberry, willow etc.) from the system.
- Undertake a catchment processes study, otherwise termed *geomorphology*. This geomorphology study determines how the various land and water uses within the catchment influence sediment and flow, which in turn affects the quality and function of the ecosystem

Community Consultation:

Community consultation is crucial to the studies and to the development of final recommendations to improve catchment health. A Community Reference Group has been formed to assist in the development of a community engagement plan for each project and to act as a conduit for information between the project team and the local community. It will also help to ensure that local knowledge of the river is captured and expressed in the WAP. Public and stakeholder meetings are also planned to inform stakeholders of project developments.

If you would like further information about the Waterway Action Plan please contact Anthony Wilson (0428 297 880) or Peter Sacco (0419 361 772) of the North East Catchment Management Authority



Saltland Genie Web Site

This web site focuses on productive use of saline land. It is an interactive web site that allows you to explore the pro's and con's of eleven different management options for saline land. The site includes farmers stories, case studies, research reports and published products. The sites basis is the research and development from the National Sustainable Grazing on saline land (SGSL) program. It is an initiative of the Land, Water & Wool Program and the Future Farm Industries Cooperative Research Centre.

www.saltlandgenie.org.au

World Wetlands Day 2009 – Upstream Downstream

World Wetlands Day (WWD) is celebrated each year on 2nd February and marks the date of the signing of the Convention on Wetlands 2 February 1971, in the Iranian City of Ramsar. Each year the WWD organisers (Ramsar) select a different theme with the suggested theme for 2009 being: river basins and their management. Ramsar hope that WWD in 2009 will be an opportunity for people to look around at their own wetland and its interconnections with the environment around it – how the wetland benefits the surroundings and, of course, how activities throughout the river basin may affect their wetland. To complement their theme the slogan “Upstream Downstream: wetlands connect us all,” has been selected. Further information can be found at www.ramsar.org

What is a Wetland? Wetlands are areas that have acquired special characteristics through being wet on a regular or semi-regular basis. The term ‘wetlands’ includes swamps, billabongs, lakes and saltmarshes, bogs, soaks, mudflats and mangroves.

Did you know that the North East region provides a home to 1,952 wetlands that cover almost 40,000 hectares; including a range of wetland types such as shallow freshwater marshes, freshwater meadows and deep freshwater marshes. Also the North East alpine and subalpine areas contain Victoria’s largest collection of mossbeds!

The North East is also special because we have eight wetlands listed in the Directory of Important Wetlands in

Australia. These include Black Swamp, Ryans Lagoon, Davies Plain, Mount Buffalo Peatlands, Lake Hume, Lake Dartmouth and the Ovens and Mitta Mitta rivers. These are significant for the environmental benefits they offer, particularly habitat and feeding grounds for fauna.

Wetlands are important for many reasons! Wetlands are:

- highly diverse and productive ecosystems, critical for the conservation of biodiversity and ecological productivity; important sites for migratory waders;
- a key element in the cycling of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide and play a major role in the world-wide carbon cycle;
- critically important for providing much-needed refuges for animals in time of drought;
- essential in the maintenance of healthy floodplains and in-stream river communities;
- provide a wide range of ecosystem services to humans – they intercept and modify nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorous, trap water during floods and afterwards release it slowly, thus minimising flood surges; and are
- often important sites for recreation, such as fishing and camping.

For more information: Sarah Daniell at North East Catchment Management Authority, Wodonga Ph 0260437600.



Is That Too Much? Or Too Little Water? Has This Ever Crossed Your Mind As Your Irrigation Meter Ticks Over?

Irrigation meters have steadily been installed over the last few years across the region. Although a number of irrigators may be a little less than excited about this, it does provide a good opportunity to examine the performance of the irrigation over the last season. The meter can provide the volume of water applied over the irrigation season and knowing the irrigated area an application rate in either ML/ha or mm can be determined.

This application rate can then be compared to what theoretically should have been applied over the season. This is calculated from the climatic data at a specific location and for the specific crop type grown. These relatively quick calculations can then provide valuable information as to whether too much or too little water was applied.

Climatic data for different locations throughout the region can be obtained by the Department of Primary industries. Who can also accurately measure the area irrigated on the farm. For more information contact Dennis Watson at DPI- Rutherglen on (02) 6030 4567.



Stock Containment Areas—Are They A Useful Tool To You

North East region livestock producers are being encouraged to consider the merits of establishing stock containment areas to aid in the management of their property. While drought and unpredictable seasonal conditions have prevailed during the last few years there have been more of these facilities established by livestock producers in the region.

The purpose of stock containment areas is to assist with stock management during prolonged drought, adverse climatic conditions and in times of emergency such as fire. Confining stock can protect paddocks from overgrazing by retaining sufficient groundcover to minimise wind and water erosion. These facilities can also make feeding, managing and monitoring of livestock easier and more effective while reducing their energy requirements.

DPI has developed Stock Containment Area guidelines for both sheep and cattle. These are available from the DPI website: www.dpi.vic.gov.au. Once this website is accessed, select the heading option titled: Information Notes Series and then use the search facility by typing in LC0075 or LC0077. These are the two guidelines titled; Stock Containment Areas LC0075 and Water Supply for Stock Containment Areas LC0077.

These are useful guidelines to use during both the planning and establishment phases of building these facilities. Stock containment areas should be set up as purpose built and permanent facilities with strong stock proof fencing, adequate gates and feed troughs and a reliable water supply on a carefully selected part of the property. The guidelines recommend to allow 2 to 5 square metres / head for sheep whereas 10 to 15 square metres / head for cattle.

Livestock producers within the North East Catchment Management Authority region wanting more information on stock containment areas should direct their enquiries to Ian Gamble, DPI Drought Soil Health Officer, Wangaratta. Ph: (03) 57238671.

Landholder Profile

Cath and Richard Watter live north of Wangaratta on the edge of the Killawarra Forest and are taking part in the Greta-Warby-Killawarra Targeted Area Project. The project aims to assist landholders to protect areas of native grassland and bush, and improve linkages across the area by buffering waterways, treed roadsides and creating corridors.

Cath and Richard's property consists of gentle to steep and in parts rocky land, partly cleared with threatened Box-Ironbark Forest and Grassy Woodland, and grassland atop Wallaby Hill. Their project involves a Conservation Covenant with Trust for Nature, and a 5 year management plan and payments to assist with fencing, controlling weeds and restoring missing plant species and communities across 28ha of the property.

What is it you love about your property?

Richard: "It's really beautiful in a unique way. Cath and I love it and so do the kids. It's a great place for a family. We moved here only 3 years ago and have seen it at its worst and we still love it. You can see life just waiting to come back".

What is your vision for the property?

Richard: "We see ourselves as an extension of the forest. We want our property to be part of a corridor". The Watter's property is in an area where the Killawarra Forest comes close to meeting up with the woodlands along the Ovens River.

What interested you in the project?

Richard: "We were contacted by DPI/DSE/TFN via letter. We thought we could get some information to help us along the way. Extension staff were able to tell us what was there, e.g. plants, and give us a fresh perspective on things. The expert advice and management plan gives us guidance to look after the area and take things forward. It has firmed up our vision. We think it is a really worthwhile project".

What made you want to permanently protect this area with a conservation covenant through Trust for Nature?

Richard: "It didn't have to be the whole block, just the area we want to protect permanently. It builds on the great work done by the previous owners, planting and letting things seed. It will protect our work and our plans for the area for the future in perpetuity".

If you would like more information about the Greta-Warby-Killawarra Targeted Area Project please contact Sarah Kelly (DSE) or Mary Anderson (DPI) on (03) 5723 8600. For information on Trust for Nature covenants please contact Jim Blackney on (03) 5728 6620.



Picture: Grassland area looking across to the Box-Ironbark Forest section

**For information on land and biodiversity management contact any of the following
DPI or DSE staff:**

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To The Landholder

If you would like to receive this information/publication in an accessible format (such as large print or audio) please call the Customer Service Centre on 136 186; TTY: 1800122 969, or email customer.service@dpi.vic.gov.au.

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