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Report to the Rural Services and Wairarapa and
Wairarapa Regional Pest Management Strategy Sub-Committee
from Wayne O'Donnell, Manager, Biosecurity

Wellington City Pest Plant Control Programme Review

1. Purpose

To supply additional information on the Wellington City Programme (WCP) review, including future management options for consideration by the Sub-Committee.

2. Background

Report 02.264 (attached), presented to the Rural Service & Wairarapa Committee's May 2002 meeting, proposed a review of the WCP. The report recommended the Committee appoint a Sub-Committee to review the Programme and that the Sub-Committee report a preferred position to the Rural Services and Wairarapa Committee at the August 2002 meeting. Due to delays in having the inaugural meeting of the Sub-Committee, a preferred position report will not be required until the 1st October Committee meeting.

While the earlier report presented background information on the WCP, it lacked detail in regard to historical developments over its nine year term. This report provides a chronological record in more detail.

3. The Programme : 1993 - 2002

The original survey commenced at Tawa in January 1993, following the appointment of a fixed term employee to carry out individual property inspections. The survey focused solely on Old Mans Beard (OMB). Occupiers were required to clear and maintain all infestations identified.

The employee resigned at the end of the contract period. Another person was employed in July 1993 on a one-year contract. By June 1994, the survey had

extended south of Tawa into Glenside. A part of Wadestown had also been surveyed in conjunction with the roadside clearance programme being conducted by Wellington City Council taskforce Green workers. By this time, a total of 686 sites had been recorded. At the end of June 1994, the employment contract expired with the contractor not seeking renewal.

By this stage it had become evident that the time required to complete maintenance inspections and compliance enforcement was adversely affecting progress. In August 1994, the contractors employed on the programme were increased to two. By June 1995, the survey had progressed to the suburbs of Khandallah, Broadmeadows & Newlands.

At the end of June 1995, a total of 1,040 sites of OMB had been located. The survey continued through Ngaio and Crofton Downs. At the end of June 1996, the number of OMB sites recorded since the start of the programme had reached 1,522. During the year ending June 1996 the two contractors had inspected a combined total of 1,841 properties.

4. Regional Pest Management Strategy Implementation

The first Regional Pest Management Strategy, approved in July 1996, expanded the WCP to include inspections for Wild Ginger and Cathedral Bells. The increased workload necessitated the employment of a third fixed term contractor who commenced work in September 1996.

By June 1997, recorded sites totalled 2,249 OMB, 585 Wild Ginger, and 14 Cathedral Bells. During the same year the three staff completed 4,215 inspections.

The growing number of active sites, and the continuing need to re-inspect to ensure compliance reached such a level in 1998 that no initial inspections could be undertaken. Enforcement actions became more frequent as occupier compliance decreased. This situation continued into 1999.

Report 99.262 to the May 1999 Rural Services and Wairarapa Committee proposed that maintenance inspections of all infected properties stop in favour of a random approach. This proposal was adopted and procedures implemented to ensure two hundred randomly selected properties were inspected within the surveyed area each year. All sites located during initial inspections were to be re-inspected once within a 12 month period, and would then become part of the random programme. By December 1999, the first random inspection programme was completed. Of the 200 properties inspected, 51 were found to have OMB plants at various stages of growth.

An intensive effort to progress initial inspections was made in 1999-2000, with the suburb of Karori the focus of this work. A total of 3,190 initial inspections or 70% of Karori properties were completed. Total inspections for the year, including other WCP inspections, were 3,719. In 2000-01, initial inspections were completed in Karori and programmes commenced in the heavily infested suburbs of Northland and Wilton. Random inspections for the

year revealed that at least 50% of the 200 properties had regrowth or new infestations.

During the 2001-02 year, WCP staff have progressed the initial programme to complete the Wilton /Northland areas. Infestation rates in this area are running at greater than 50% and progress has been painfully slow. Through the period November to February the third annual random inspection programme was completed. Inspections were increased to 400 with a very disappointing re-infestation rate of 73%.

At present there are 3,734 sites of OMB, 2,050 of Wild Ginger and 108 of Cathedral Bells in the surveyed area. A further 2,005 sites of OMB, 148 of Wild Ginger and 29 of Cathedral Bells have been recorded in other parts of the City not yet surveyed. The latter sites have been located either by Wellington City Council staff identifying infestations on reserve land or through Biosecurity staff dealing with complaints. The number of recorded sites for the three species now totals 8,074.

5. Implications of the new RPMS 2002-2022

The new RPMS has increased the number of pest plant species to be managed within the WCP. The inclusion of Climbing Asparagus and Banana Passionfruit has impacted significantly on the workload of staff. In anticipation of this an additional officer was employed in September 2001 bringing the total to four. Although the Strategy's ratification has been delayed, staff have commenced service delivery and provided advice to occupiers regarding the new species. A recent resignation has reduced the number of officers to three. Determination of a replacement will be made at the completion of this review process.

With an increasing focus on biodiversity protection under the new Strategy, the WCP total control policy for OMB in Wellington City has become questionable. As the programme moves into the southern half of the City, and the distance from significant reserve areas in need of protection increases, many occupiers are questioning or asking the purpose of the programme. Many are not interested in the aesthetic degradation caused by OMB infestation. The imposition of enforced control, sometimes at significant expense, is becoming increasingly resented. Those who do have a concern with this plant and are prepared to control it on their property, do however, deserve protection from neighbouring sites.

6. Staff

The level of pest plant control achieved throughout the northern half of the City is a credit to those who have been involved to date. This has been a unique programme, the scale of which has probably not been attempted in New Zealand before.

The programme has always had difficulties in retaining good staff. A total of 16 people have been involved since 1993. Staff have found the work difficult and, at times, unpleasant with the occasional confrontational situation arising. The apparent scale of the problem as the programme moves into the southern suburbs is seen by some as too great a challenge. This has resulted in staff questioning why some areas are being cleared, as the positive impact on biodiversity is non-existent.

While the calibre and initial dedication of those employed has been high, frustration and burnout soon become evident. Most resignations are due to career advancement but several have resigned because they could no longer cope. The staff turnover has increased over recent years. Currently the average tenure stands at 17 months. High turnover levels have adversely affected progress. Generally it takes in excess of one month to obtain reasonable proficiency from a trainee.

7. Public Reaction

It is clear that many City ratepayers support the programme. However most of this support is due to the programmes recent focus on key ecological areas within the City. Public resistance is becoming more noticeable as initial work moves into areas of higher infestation and lower owner occupancy. Resistance levels have increased as the programme moves further from City Reserves.

Despite this apparent change in attitude, it is still likely that a reduction or termination of initial surveys may generate adverse comment-

- Landowners in surveyed areas may be annoyed if enforcement is not pursued throughout the City.
- Others with environmental concerns may insist that City-wide control of OMB remains the aim to ensure the protection of all bush remnants no matter how insignificant.
- Wellington City Council is likely to be concerned if a reduction places more responsibility on them.
- Criticism could also come from other local authorities where infestation levels are no longer a problem.

8. Biological Control

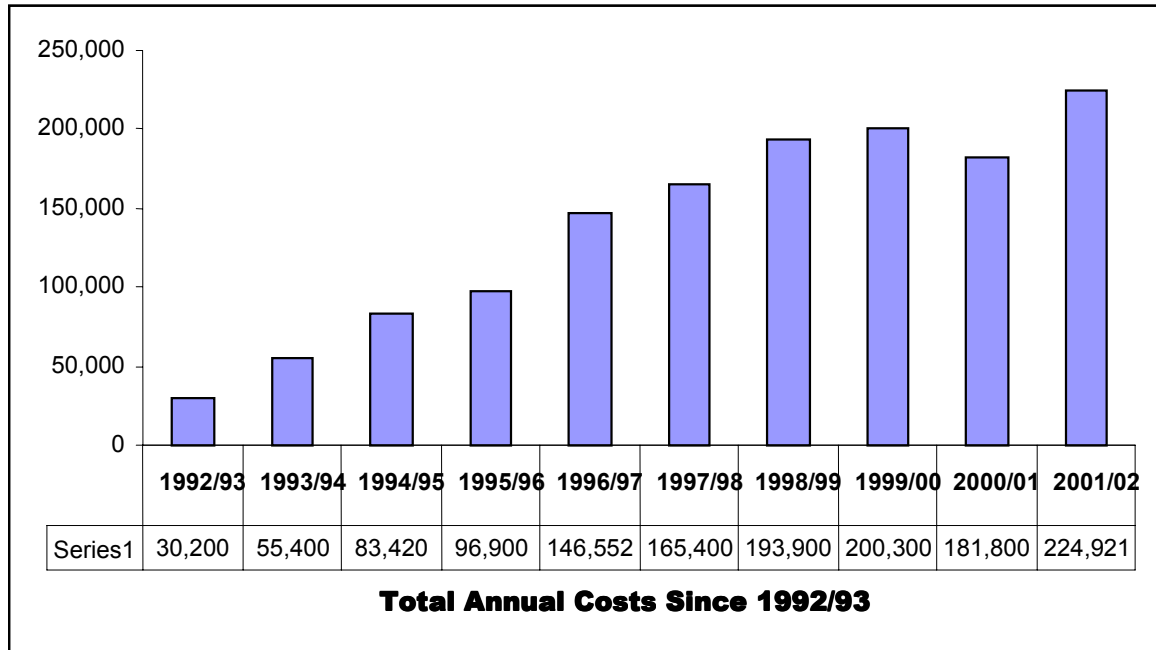
The impact of biological control on OMB and other species in the WCP remains uncertain. Regionally, three agents have been released for the control of OMB. OMB Leaf Miner and OMB Fungus are now well established in Wellington City but to date their damage has been of little significance. The most recent agent (OMB Sawfly) was released at a site east of Upper Hutt last autumn. However, it will be two or more years before the success of this agent can be determined. Landcare Research Ltd. continues to investigate additional biological control for OMB. They are also currently investigating agents for the control of Banana Passionfruit and Boneseed, species important to the WCP.

9. Expenditure

Since the inception of the Programme in 1993, expenditure has increased annually. The major components are staff and transport costs with some legal and material expenses also contributing.

The graph in Figure 1 shows the actual annual cost of the WCP for the period 1992/93 to 2001/02, in 2002 dollars.

Figure 1



10. Linkage with the Key Native Ecosystem Programme

The Key Native Ecosystem (KNE) programme has a major focus in Wellington City. The recently completed re-prioritisation process confirms the City Green Belt as an ecosystem of regional importance. In recent years, the City Council has jointly funded a number of possum control operations in the Green Belt. These include the following areas –

- Otari / Wiltons Bush
- Trelissick Park
- Johnston Hill
- Khandallah Park
- Johnsonville Park
- Huntleigh Park
- Kaiwharawhara / Ngaraunga
- Karori Park
- Makara Peak
- Wright's Hill
- Denton Park / Polhill

The Regional Council was also active in the initial pest control programme for the Karori Wildlife Sanctuary.

More recently, the KNE operations have expanded to include pest plant control, including Otari and Trelissick Park. The focus on enhancing the biodiversity of the Wellington City Green Belt is likely to continue. The combined programme has supported the widespread work of numerous community groups active in protecting local forest remnants, stream margins and wetlands.

The greatest threat to the KNE programme is the proliferation of pest plants. Unfortunately, the problem is often exacerbated by the removal of grazing mammals, including possums and goats.

11. Proposed Options

The following options and estimated costs are proposed for consideration and discussion -

Option A Continue with the existing programme. It is estimated that without a major increase in resources it would take 20 years to complete an initial survey and control programme through the remaining half of the City. The programme will be very slow due to increasing levels of infestation and occupier resistance. If surveyed areas were to be maintained to a reasonable standard the resource base would need to continually increase (as per Figure 1) as the survey expands into the southern portion of the City.

Estimated costs for 2002/03 are \$235,000, rising to \$300,000 in 2007/08. The total annual cost may be as high as \$500,000 at the end of the 20 year period.

Option B Discontinue all survey and maintenance control work and only respond to complaints. Control by enforcement. Estimated cost for the first full year is \$150,000 with costs for succeeding years increasing only marginally.

Option C Discontinue the initial survey in the southern portion of the City. Act on complaints to ensure occupiers of clear properties are protected from neighbouring infestations.

In the northern surveyed area, ensure all recorded sites of OMB and other key pest plants are regularly inspected. Increase the level of service delivery in new 'buffer zones' to protect City KNE sites.

This option ensures the maintenance of sites already cleared and the protection of the City's significant ecological areas. The estimated cost for the first full year is \$220,000 with costs

remaining fairly static for the following 5 years. After this period inspection and control costs may begin to reduce with declining levels of re-infestation.

12. Recommendation

- (1) *That the report be received.*
- (2) *That the Sub-Committee agree a preferred position on the future of the Wellington City Pest Plant Control Programme.*
- (3) *That the Sub-Committee report their preferred position to the October 2002 meeting of the Rural Services and Wairarapa Committee.*

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