

Feedback on national environmental biosecurity roundtables

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The Invasive Species Council strongly supports national environmental biosecurity roundtables convened by the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources and the Department of Environment and Energy in 2016 and 2017. We also endorse the recent decision to align meetings of the NBC Environment and Invasives Committee with environmental biosecurity roundtables. The roundtables are one important way of realising the recommendations of the IGAB review to give the community a 'stronger role and voice in further developing the national system' and to 'focus on environment and community as well as industry partnerships' (recommendation 8).

The main challenges are to engender broader NGO participation (in the forums and the national biosecurity system) and achieve improved biosecurity outcomes. We offer these proposals to maximise the value of roundtables for participants and for biosecurity.

Situation to date

Three forums were held in 2016 and 2017: two in Canberra, one in Sydney.

They were consistently attended by representatives of four environmental NGOs (The Council of Australasian Weed Societies, Australian Network for Plant Conservation, Australian Association of Bush Regenerators, the Invasive Species Council) and by NRM group representatives when it coincided with their presence in the host city. They have been attended by staff from the federal agricultural and environment departments (although representation from the latter has been significantly less than the former), CSIRO and other researchers, environmental data managers, state/territory environmental and agricultural departments and the Wet Tropics Management Authority. We cannot recall any participation by major national NGOs (except Bush Heritage Australia) and local government.

The agenda for the first forum was developed jointly between the Department of Agriculture and the Invasive Species Council. Agendas for subsequent meetings were developed by the department after requesting ideas and potential speakers from roundtable participants and invitees.

From an environmental perspective, the forums were useful in building awareness of the environmental aspects of the national biosecurity system and hearing about the latest government policy initiatives.

The first forum went for 3.5 hours and was too rushed, not allowing any time for detailed discussion. The two subsequent forums were longer (6 and 8 hours respectively, including an hour for lunch).

The small group approach of the roundtables meant that the views of individual participants were compiled and summarised but there was no opportunity for the development of a considered

view from the NGO sector. The success of the small group discussions also depended on the quality of the scribe, which has been highly variable. The discussions during the last two forums focused on issues of interest to government with little opportunity for discussion and follow-up on issues of concern to conservation organisations.

1. Engendering broader NGO participation

To achieve optimal participation, we need to identify all potential participants and assess their biosecurity interests and activities.

1.1 Identify potential participants

The NGO sector with an interest in environmental biosecurity is very broad (although much of the interest is in the most harmful or most widespread invasive species) and is likely to include relevant groups not yet identified as potential roundtable participants. The sector provides a wide range of biosecurity services and includes considerable biosecurity expertise.

To indicate the range of NGOs – not all of whom would label themselves environmental NGOs – here are four categories:

- Advocacy groups (eg. Invasive Species Council, WWF-Australia, Australian Network for Plant Conservation, Island Conservation, state national parks associations) that focus or mainly or partly on policy reform and public education. Their contribution can also include on-ground work such as eradication projects undertaken by Island Conservation, surveillance by national parks associations or technical work such as the prioritisation project undertaken by ISC (with Monash University).
- Representative bodies (eg. Ecological Society of Australia, weed societies, peak conservation bodies in each state) that represent the interests of their members, including advocating or advising on biosecurity policy reform.
- NRM, land management and rehabilitation and species recovery groups (eg. Bushcare, NRM and Landcare groups, Greening Australia, trusts and land conservancies such as Victoria's Trust for Nature and Tasmanian Land Conservancy) that are involved in planning and advising, and initiating and funding on-ground projects to manage invasive species.

Conservation land managers (eg. Bush Heritage Australia, Australian Wildlife Conservancy, conservation covenant holders and traditional owner groups managing Indigenous Protected Areas) that undertake management of invasive species on protected areas, as well as some advocacy and policy advice.

Recommendation 1:

- **Identify the full range of Australian NGOs likely to have some interest in environmental biosecurity (the environment department would be able to assist with this), including potential interest in participating in roundtables and being consulted on biosecurity policies.**

1.2 Assess NGO interests, activities and awareness

A better understanding of the NGO sector would be useful as a way to identify likely participants, including for targeted consultation on particular issues. This information would also be useful more broadly, including for (a) establishing a baseline of biosecurity activities conducted by Australian NGOs, (b) identifying potential participants in biosecurity activities such as surveillance and public education, and (c) identifying gaps in biosecurity awareness and focus within the NGO sector. In a 2013 online survey by the Invasive Species Council, community organisations reported biosecurity work (mostly by volunteers) valued at \$62 million a year. Our sample represented probably less than 10% of the total community sector doing such work. The majority of NGO activity is directed to managing the impacts of established invasive species on biodiversity.

Recommendation 2:

- **Conduct a survey of NGOs to identify their biosecurity activities, interests and awareness.**

1.3 Support NGO participation

Attendance at a roundtable can be expensive, including airfares and accommodation for those from other states and salaries for staff or forgone work for volunteers. NGOs typically have little funding and those not based in the southeast are unlikely to attend if roundtables continue to be held only in Canberra, Sydney or Melbourne. On the other hand, holding roundtables in other locations is more expensive for the government.

Recommendation 3:

- **Offer to pay the travel costs of at least three NGOs per roundtable (or offer part subsidies to a larger number) to facilitate participation from groups not in the southeast and by those who would not otherwise participate.**

2. Achieving biosecurity outcomes

It is essential that roundtables lead to action that result in improved biosecurity. No one – from governments or NGOs – wants to waste their time on ‘talkfests’ or for box ticking.

2.1 Make biosecurity roundtables count

NGOs are likely to consistently attend roundtables only if they see them leading to improved biosecurity outcomes relevant to their work. Roundtables have been useful thus far for providing information to participants about biosecurity and the activities of government and for eliciting participant views on various issues. We think the roundtables need to move beyond this to focus also on achieving real outcomes for biosecurity. Ideally, NGOs would contribute to agenda setting and be able to use the roundtables to advance projects they consider important.

The terms of reference endorsed by participants at the second meeting are broad enough to support a wide range of functions, including:

- Information-sharing (as they already do)
- Eliciting views on biosecurity issues (as they already do)
- Consulting on specific proposed biosecurity reforms
- Identifying biosecurity work priorities
- Codesigning biosecurity projects and facilitating collaboration
- Brainstorming/developing solutions for biosecurity problems

It is important to also be clear to participants what the roundtables won't focus on. Some participants in past roundtables have wanted to focus on state or local issues, particularly management of widely established invasive species (which can be nationally relevant if involving key threatening processes or national eradications).

Recommendation 4:

- **Establish a small government-NGO working group to identify the full range of potential roundtable functions and develop ideas for future forums.**

2.2 Identify topics of potential interest and plan well ahead

It would be useful to keep a running list of potential topics for roundtables and invite participants to contribute topic proposals. As an example, here is a list of 'top-of-head' topics that would be of interest to the Invasive Species Council (in no particular order):

- The potential roles of citizen scientists in biosecurity
- Community contributions to surveillance
- Identifying and stopping illegal trade in harmful species
- Monitoring internet trading of prohibited species
- The role of the precautionary principle/approach in biosecurity
- Prioritisation of potential environmental invaders
- Improving preparedness – priority contingency plans
- Improving engagement with the environmental sector
- Improving public education on biosecurity
- Improving the key threatening process and threat abatement plan system under the EPBC Act

To maximise the value of roundtables, the working group proposed above could plan a year's worth of roundtables (two to three per year) with at least 3 months' lead time per roundtable.

The experience with roundtables to date has shown that full day forums are necessary to ensure they advance beyond being information sessions and allow for detailed discussion of issues.

Recommendations 5:

- **Develop a list of potential roundtable topics and invite suggestions from roundtable participants.**

Recommendations 6:

- **A government-NGO working group plan the focus of roundtables well ahead and invite suggestions for each agenda.**

2.3 Additional consultation

The format of roundtables to date has involved consultation via small group sessions. This can be useful for generating ideas and allowing detailed discussion but it precludes the development and communication of a collective NGO view and deeper discussion between the government and NGO representatives about issues of interest.

Consultation on some issues can be conducted during roundtables if NGOs are provided with sufficient lead time and information to consult peers and develop a sector view as a basis for discussion during a roundtable.

Some issues require discussion and consultation outside the roundtable format. Currently, the only avenue for that is when individual NGOs (mostly the Invasive Species Council) seek meetings with biosecurity officials. To foster broader and meaningful consultation and progress on environmental projects, we recommend that regular (quarterly) meetings be scheduled. Some could be timed to coincide with other NGO or government forums to limit the need for additional travel and some could be conducted by Skype.

Recommendation 7:

- **Provide sufficient lead time and information for NGOs to develop a sector view on specific biosecurity issues that can be the basis for discussion in roundtables.**

Recommendations 8:

- **Outside the roundtables, schedule regular meetings – preferably to coincide with other meetings or by Skype – to progress consultation on particular issues or develop projects.**

Comment and feedback

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