



Submission on the Northern Territory Government's Draft Buffel Grass Weed Management Plan 2026-2036

Submission by the Invasive Species Council

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About the Invasive Species Council

The Invasive Species Council was formed in 2002 to advocate for stronger laws, policies and programs to keep Australian biodiversity safe from weeds, feral animals, exotic pathogens and other invaders. It is a not-for-profit charitable organisation, funded predominantly by donations from supporters and philanthropic organisations.

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Summary of recommendations

Recommendation 1: Urgently declare buffel grass in the Katherine and Darwin Weed Management Regions as a Class A weed (requiring eradication) to prioritise early intervention, while mandating it as at least a Class B weed (growth and spread to be controlled) in the remainder of the Northern Territory.

Recommendation 2: Management requirements must be extended to all conservation areas and transport corridors across the entire Northern Territory, rather than limiting these requirements to only the Alice Springs and Tennant Creek Weed Management Regions.

Recommendation 3: The Buffel Grass Education and Assistance Program should be available to all conservation land managers, transport corridor managers, and interested private, public, and Aboriginal landholders across the Northern Territory, rather than being restricted to Central Australia.

Recommendation 4: We strongly oppose the proposed 10-year industry-wide exemption for pastoralists. If a permit system is implemented, it must have significantly shorter timeframes, regular review periods, and mandatory reporting and monitoring requirements.

Recommendation 5: Formally support the WoNS nomination and that buffel grass be listed as a standalone Key Threatening Process under national law to reflect the severity and scale of its impact.

Introduction

The Invasive Species Council welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission on the Weed Management Plan Buffel Grass 2026-2036 proposed by the Northern Territory Government. This submission addresses the critical need for a stronger regulatory framework regarding *Cenchrus ciliaris* (buffel grass). Buffel grass represents one of the most significant and enduring invasive species challenges facing the Northern Territory and Australia more broadly. Its continued spread is not the result of insufficient evidence, but of delayed and fragmented policy responses that have failed to keep pace with the scale and severity of its impacts. As outlined in this submission, the current weed management plan does not yet provide the regulatory strength, consistency, or preventative focus required to meaningfully curb further invasion and ecological harm.

The recommendations put forward by the Invasive Species Council are grounded in well-established invasive species management principles: early intervention, prioritisation based on risk and impact, coordinated action across jurisdictions and land tenures, and shared responsibility supported by adequate education and resourcing. Taken together, these measures would shift buffel grass management away from a largely reactive approach and toward a more strategic, preventative framework capable of protecting biodiversity, cultural landscapes, and ecosystem function over the long term.

Delays in strengthening management settings will increase future management costs and further entrench ecological impacts. Conversely, strengthening national recognition, closing regulatory gaps, supporting land managers, and avoiding long-term exemptions present a clear opportunity to limit further spread and demonstrate leadership in invasive species governance. The following sections outline our key recommendations for eradication and control.

1. Prioritise early intervention through regionally appropriate weed classification

Early intervention is a cornerstone of effective invasive species management. Where invasive species are detected before they become widespread, eradication can be ecologically feasible and cost-effective. In contrast, delayed action allows invasive species to establish, spread rapidly, and become effectively impossible to remove, resulting in long-term environmental and economic costs. Buffel grass is currently at different stages of invasion across the Northern Territory, yet its regulatory classification does not adequately reflect this variation in risk.

In the Katherine and Darwin Weed Management Regions, buffel grass is still at a comparatively early stage of establishment. These regions represent a critical opportunity for preventative action to avoid the large-scale, landscape-level impacts already observed in Central Australia. Failing to apply the strongest possible regulatory controls in these regions risks repeating the same management failures, allowing buffel grass to spread unchecked until eradication is no longer viable.

Conversely, in regions where buffel grass is already widespread, containment and impact

reduction must be the priority to protect people and nature. A consistent minimum classification is necessary to ensure that control obligations apply across the Territory and that further spread into high-value conservation and cultural landscapes is actively limited.

Recommendation 1: Declare buffel grass as a Class A weed (eradication required) in the Katherine and Darwin Weed Management Regions to prioritise early intervention and prevent further spread. In all other parts of the Northern Territory, buffel grass should be listed at a minimum as a Class B weed to require control of its growth and spread.

2. Close regulatory gaps across conservation areas and transport corridors

Invasive species spread is strongly influenced by disturbance and movement pathways, particularly along roads, rail lines, and other transport corridors. These areas act as major conduits for invasion, enabling rapid dispersal of invasive plants into surrounding landscapes, including high-value conservation areas. Despite this, current buffel grass management requirements are geographically limited, creating regulatory gaps that undermine effective containment and control.

Restricting mandatory management to only the Alice Springs and Tennant Creek Weed Management Regions fails to account for the territory-wide nature of invasive species spread. Conservation areas outside these regions remain vulnerable to invasion, while unmanaged transport corridors continue to function as persistent sources of reinfestation. This fragmented approach places disproportionate responsibility on some land managers while allowing known invasion pathways to remain inadequately regulated.

Extending management obligations across all conservation areas and transport corridors would better align regulatory settings with established invasive species management principles, ensuring that high-risk spread zones are consistently addressed and that public land does not become a vector for ongoing invasion.

Recommendation 2: Management requirements should be extended to all conservation areas and transport corridors across the Northern Territory, rather than being limited to the Alice Springs and Tennant Creek Weed Management Regions.

3. Support effective invasive species management through education and assistance

Successful invasive species management relies not only on regulation, but also on education, resourcing, and shared responsibility. Land managers are more likely to comply with control requirements and achieve meaningful outcomes when they have access to clear guidance, technical support, and financial assistance. However, the current Buffel Grass Education and Assistance Program is geographically restricted, limiting its effectiveness and equity.

Buffel grass impacts and invasion risks extend well beyond Central Australia. Conservation land managers, transport authorities, Aboriginal landholders, and private landholders across the

Northern Territory are all confronting current or emerging buffel grass threats. Restricting access to education and assistance programs creates uneven capacity to respond and undermines the Territory-wide objectives of invasive species prevention and control.

Expanding the program would strengthen early detection, improve management consistency, and empower landholders to act before buffel grass becomes entrenched. This approach aligns with best practice invasive species frameworks, which emphasise capacity-building and collaboration as essential complements to regulatory measures.

Recommendation 3: Expand the Buffel Grass Education and Assistance Program territory-wide. The Education and Assistance Program should be available to conservation land managers, transport corridor managers, and affected private, public, and Aboriginal landholders across the entire Northern Territory, rather than being restricted to Central Australia.

4. Avoid regulatory exemptions that entrench invasive species impacts

Long-term exemptions from invasive species control requirements risk normalising environmental harm and undermining the integrity of weed management frameworks. The proposed 10-year industry-wide exemption for pastoralists would significantly weaken buffel grass controls at a time when urgent action is needed to limit further spread and ecological damage.

Extended exemptions allow invasive species to continue expanding across large landholdings, increasing the likelihood of spread into neighbouring conservation areas, Aboriginal lands, and transport corridors. Permits undermine government and community efforts to control and mitigate buffel grass impacts and increase management costs. This shifts the burden of control onto other land managers and the public sector, while locking in future costs and ecological impacts. From an invasive species management perspective, such exemptions contradict the principles of shared responsibility, accountability, and adaptive management.

We recommend that any permit regime use shorter permit durations with regular review. Shorter permit durations, regular review points, and mandatory monitoring and reporting are essential to ensure that exemptions remain genuinely transitional and that progress toward improved management is measurable.

Recommendation 4: Remove the proposed 10-year industry-wide exemption. If a permit system is implemented, it must include significantly shorter timeframes, regular review periods, and mandatory reporting and monitoring requirements to prevent ongoing spread and environmental harm.

5. Champion recognition of buffel grass as a nationally significant invasive species threat

The Northern Territory community has a strong interest in national action and support for listing buffel grass as a Weed of National Significance (WoNS), opening the door to coordinated action, research and funding **and the establishment of clear national leadership mechanisms.**

Invasive species are a leading driver of biodiversity loss in Australia, yet national responses remain fragmented and reactive. Buffel grass demonstrates how invasive plants can transform ecosystems at scale by outcompeting native vegetation, simplifying habitats, disrupting ecological processes, and altering fire regimes. These impacts extend across landscapes and jurisdictions, placing buffel grass firmly within the category of invasive species that require coordinated national governance rather than piecemeal state-based management.

A defining characteristic of high-impact invasive species is their ability to alter fundamental ecosystem processes, and buffel grass does this with exceptional severity. By increasing fuel loads and fire frequency, buffel grass creates a self-reinforcing invasion–fire feedback loop that accelerates its spread while suppressing native vegetation. In fire-sensitive ecosystems, this leads to widespread native species loss, ecosystem degradation, and the conversion of diverse landscapes into simplified grass-dominated systems.

The current regulatory approach does not adequately reflect buffel grass's status as a nationally significant invasive species. Recognition as a WoNS and as a standalone key threatening process would help drive a more coordinated and better resourced response consistent with the scale of threat. In addition, the appointment of a national buffel grass coordinator would provide a focal point for leadership, supporting strategic planning, information sharing, and alignment of management efforts across jurisdictions and land tenures.

Strengthening national recognition of buffel grass would align with best-practice invasive species management principles, including prioritisation based on impact, coordinated cross-jurisdictional action, and clearly defined responsibility. WoNS and KTP listings, supported by national coordination, would elevate buffel grass as a national invasive species priority and help translate recognition into effective on-ground outcomes.

Recommendation 5: Formally support the nomination of buffel grass as a Weed of National Significance, the listing of it as a standalone Key Threatening Process under the EPBC Act, and the preparation of a threat abatement plan. This approach would recognise buffel grass as a high-impact invasive species of national concern, enabling a tangible and more coordinated, preventative response commensurate with the scale and severity of its ecological, cultural and social impacts.

Conclusion

Buffel grass continues to spread not because its impacts are uncertain, but because management responses have not kept pace with the evidence. The Invasive Species Council urges the Northern Territory Government to adopt these recommendations in full as part of the revised Weed Management Plan Buffel Grass 2026–2036. Doing so would represent a critical step toward aligning policy with evidence, safeguarding Country, and addressing one of Australia’s most damaging invasive species with the urgency and coordination it demands.