



Murray Region Forestry Hub Strategic Blackberry Forum | Workshop Outcomes Report

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Prepared by

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Contents

Introduction.....	2
<i>Purpose of the Forum</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Agenda Highlights.....</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Sensemaking</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Why is Blackberry Control Important?.....</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Challenges in Blackberry Control.....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Focus Areas for Collective Effort.....</i>	<i>4</i>
Critical Success Factors	5
Ideal State.....	5
Key Strategies and Approaches	6
What Are We Trying to Achieve?	6
Ideas and Offers.....	7
<i>Policy.....</i>	<i>7</i>
Offers	7
Ideas and Thoughts	7
<i>Operations.....</i>	<i>8</i>
Offers	8
Ideas and Thoughts	9
<i>Funding.....</i>	<i>9</i>
Offers	9
Ideas and Thoughts	10
<i>Advocacy.....</i>	<i>10</i>
Offers	10
Ideas and Thoughts	11
<i>Other.....</i>	<i>11</i>
Offers	11
Ideas and Thoughts	12
Conclusion	12

Introduction

On 31 October 2024, the Murray Region Forestry Hub (MRFH) hosted a Strategic Blackberry Forum at the Albury Club in Albury. Bringing together around 50 participants, this forum aimed to address the widespread and escalating challenges posed by blackberry infestations across the region.

Attendees included representatives from national, NSW, and Victorian organisations, government agencies, private enterprises, and community groups. This diverse gathering of stakeholders reflected the collaborative approach essential to addressing what was described as a “wicked problem” - one that requires concerted effort, shared resources, and innovative solutions to achieve meaningful impact.

Purpose of the Forum

The forum was designed with four key objectives:

1. **Contextual understanding:**
To provide insights into current and past blackberry control efforts, including the economic and ecological impacts within the Murray Region Forestry Hub area.
2. **Collaborative strategy development:**
To discuss and outline the foundational elements for a joint approach to blackberry management, with a focus on creating outcomes greater than those achievable by individual efforts.
3. **Strategic direction and planning:**
To identify an agreed pathway for a sustainable, long-term plan that supports effective blackberry control.
4. **Stakeholder commitments:**
To secure support, resources, and funding from key stakeholders to foster a collaborative, tenure-blind approach to blackberry management.

Agenda Highlights

The day was structured to foster both information sharing and active collaboration. Key sessions included:

- **Contextual presentations:**
Diana Gibbs set the stage by examining the economic costs of blackberry infestations, past efforts, and the urgency of managing this invasive species across landscapes. Other scene setting presentations were made by Susan Benedyka (facilitator) and David Pasztaleniac (Forest Fire Management, Victoria).
- **Sensemaking discussions:**
Attendees participated in table-based discussions, exploring why blackberry control is essential to their organisations, the challenges they face, and where collective efforts could yield the most significant outcomes.
- **Lessons from existing efforts:**
Presentations from leaders of the Victorian Blackberry Taskforce (Lyn Coulston), and NSW Natural Resources Commission (Ben Russell), highlighted insights from past blackberry management initiatives, noting both successes and areas for improvement. NSW DPI, State Priority Weeds Coordinator (Matthew McGrath) outlined NSW policy and context for blackberry control.

- **Future directions and strategies:**
Dr Sonia Graham (University of Wollongong) and Diana Dawson specialists in collective impact outlined potential approaches and solutions. Dr Raelene Kwong, Biocontrol Scientist outlined past and potential future bio-controls, sparking discussions on long-term, integrated strategies for blackberry control. Rebel Talbert, Fire and Natural Hazards Manager with NSW Forestry Corporation presented current research outline building an understanding of the impact of blackberry infestations on access to, and intensity of, bush fires.
- **Collaborative commitments and action planning:**
The final sessions focused on envisioning the ideal state of blackberry control, identifying priority areas for collaboration, and gathering specific offers of support and resources from participating organisations.

This workshop outcomes report summarises the collective insights, key priorities, and initial commitments made by attendees. It reflects a shared recognition that while the blackberry challenge is substantial, there is a strong belief that coordinated action and a long-term vision can help mitigate the impacts of this invasive species, restoring ecological balance and protecting economic interests across the Murray Region Forestry Hub area.

Additionally, these workshop outcomes will be used to draft a Strategic Plan. Several workshop attendees offered to join a Working Group and provide feedback and input to the development of the Strategic Plan.

Sensemaking

Participants were asked to consider key questions:

- Why is blackberry control important – to them and to their organisations.
- What are the most difficult aspects of the blackberry challenge?
- Where could we be focussing our collective effort for the greatest outcome?

Why is Blackberry Control Important?

Participants highlighted multiple reasons for prioritising blackberry control:

- **Economic impact:**
High costs for control efforts and significant production losses in forestry and agriculture. Blackberry infestations lead to reduced profitability on private lands and increase maintenance expenses in public areas.
- **Biodiversity and habitat protection:**
Blackberries displace native flora and fauna, provide cover for invasive species, and contribute to biodiversity loss.
- **Fire risk and management:**
Blackberries increase fuel loads, impacting fire behaviour and making firefighting more hazardous and costly. The need for rapid firefighting access, particularly in remote areas, is crucial.
- **Social responsibility:**
There is a shared responsibility among landholders, agencies, and local councils to manage blackberry spread across tenures and protect environmental assets.

- **Community and recreational impact:**
Blackberries negatively affect recreational activities, tourism, and community relations, especially where ad hoc control responses create inconsistent results.

Challenges in Blackberry Control

Key challenges identified by the participants in regard to addressing blackberry infestations include:

- **Scale and persistence:**
Blackberries are widespread and fast-spreading, creating an ongoing problem with no clear end. The sheer scale of infestations requires extensive resources and sustained effort.
- **Funding and resource constraints:**
Inconsistent funding and lack of resources limit the ability to establish long-term, effective control programs.
- **Coordination across jurisdictions:**
The need for multi-agency collaboration is hindered by jurisdictional boundaries, leading to fragmented efforts and inefficiency.
- **Community engagement:**
Gaining consistent buy-in across different landholders and communities is challenging, especially when blackberry control does not yield immediate economic benefits.
- **Environmental and terrain constraints:**
Difficult terrain and regulations around chemical use complicate control efforts in certain areas.

Focus Areas for Collective Effort

Participants suggested several priority areas for a collective approach to blackberry management:

- **Investment in biological control:**
Long-term research funding and development of biological controls are essential for sustainable management.
- **Risk and asset-based approaches:**
Targeting high-risk zones and valuable assets, such as biodiversity hotspots, can provide the most impact per resource invested.
- **Technology integration:**
Tools like drones and LiDAR can improve monitoring and precision in hard-to-reach areas, making control efforts more efficient and reducing costs.
- **Government and community engagement:**
Advocacy for stable funding and increased collaboration at state and federal levels, alongside community programs like the Good Neighbour Program, to foster support across all tenures.
- **Data sharing and transparency:**
A centralised data hub could support information sharing, improve transparency, and inform better decision-making.

Critical Success Factors

Following the presentations about what we can learn from past efforts, participants identified the following factors as essential for successful blackberry control, from their perspectives:

- **Coordinated management across agencies:**
Unified efforts between government, private landowners, and local communities to eliminate redundancy and promote consistent actions.
- **Long-term funding commitment:**
Secured, multi-year funding is seen as critical to support ongoing research, on-ground control, and community education efforts.
- **Clear, measurable goals:**
Defining specific, realistic goals will help maintain momentum and allow stakeholders to measure and communicate progress.
- **Community engagement and buy-in:**
Social motivation and participation were identified as crucial, particularly when aiming to change public perceptions and behaviour toward blackberry management.
- **Integrated control strategies:**
Combining biological, chemical, and mechanical controls based on location-specific needs ensures more adaptable and effective management.

Ideal State

Participants articulated their desired outcomes for blackberry management and described the “ideal state”:

- **Safe and accessible fire control:**
Blackberries are reduced enough to allow safe firefighting operations and reduce fire-related risks.
- **Significant reduction in infestations:**
Blackberry populations are contained to manageable levels across all land tenures, with a notable year-on-year reduction in infestations.
- **Broad community involvement:**
A high level of engagement from landowners, stakeholders, and the public to support consistent, tenure-blind blackberry control.
- **Restoration of natural habitats:**
Areas previously dominated by blackberries are restored to support native biodiversity and improve ecosystem health.
- **Sustainable, adaptable management:**
A variety of tools and methods are available to address blackberry infestations across different land types, including plantations, national parks, and farmland.

Key Strategies and Approaches

To maximise the impact of blackberry management, participants suggested key strategies and approaches:

- **Integration of control with fire risk management:**
Link blackberry control efforts to fire management, reducing fire risks in high-infestation areas.
- **National and cross-border coordination:**
Align efforts across states to create a unified national strategy and establish a cross-border committee for coordinated action.
- **Priority area mapping and management:**
Use mapping to identify critical areas for control and tailor approaches based on specific blackberry species and ecological impacts.
- **Educational campaigns:**
Raising awareness about blackberry impacts on communities, agriculture, and ecosystems to drive more widespread support.
- **Case studies and pilot projects:**
Demonstrate success with localised projects, such as crash grazing or other innovative approaches, to build momentum and secure additional funding.

What Are We Trying to Achieve?

The forum agreed on several high-level goals for blackberry management:

- **Establish a collaborative network:**
Create a cross-border committee to coordinate efforts and serve as a central hub for data, resources, and communication.
- **Secure long-term funding for biocontrol:**
Adequate funding to support research and deployment of biological controls, ensuring sustainable management of blackberry populations.
- **Effective, long-term control programs:**
Comprehensive, ongoing control strategies that include regular monitoring, adaptive management, and evidence-based decision-making.
- **Minimise economic, environmental, and social impacts:**
Reduce blackberry spread to lessen financial burdens, enhance biodiversity, and improve community relations.
- **Pilot successful initiatives for broader application:**
Develop and implement pilot projects within the Murray Forestry Hub Region that can serve as a model for expanded efforts across other infested areas.

Ideas and Offers

All participants were invited to contribute their thoughts and ideas – as well as their offers – under five headings:

- Policy
- Operations
- Funding
- Advocacy
- Other

The full list of ideas and offers are outlined in this report.

Policy

Offers

Natural Resources Commission

- Continue to push the importance of collaborative cross-tenure approach

NSW DPIRD

- Guidance
- Knowledge
- Advice
- Guidance on NSW Biosecurity Act regulatory tools and framework
- Guidance of weed prioritisation frameworks

Agriwealth

- Will contribute where asked to policy development

GrazeAway

- Advice on how managed grazing with goats can deal with weeds, reduce fuel load, establish grasslands and riparian areas

FCNSW

- Business case development
- Advocate for fire risk to be included in risk mitigation

Mitta to Murray Landcare Inc

- Review and contribute to drafts

Crown Lands

- Local policy thoughts – consider future weed projects through collaborating with broader stakeholders where applicable

Ideas and Thoughts

- There are many offers of support, guidance, review, and contributions
- Who is the “we” that would take on development of or amendment of existing policies?
- What are all of the relevant existing policies that are in place in relation to blackberry in the Murray?
- Do the Regional strategic weed management plans, and the weed risk assessment that underpin them, need to be reviewed in light of the economic impacts report?

Operations

Offers

Agriwealth

- Continue spraying activities

Albury City

- Spatial data collection
- Traditional Owner involvement
- On-ground weed control

Alpine Resorts – Mt Hotham

- Achievable hectares to facilitate control case studies
- Headwaters for major river systems – allowing control works to “start from the source”

Alpine Resorts – Falls Creek

- Facilitate long-term research plots/management areas, with accommodation provided

Alpine Shire

- On-ground control action: local knowledge of problem areas

FCNSW

- LiDAR mapping of blackberry infestation in Tumut pine and adjacent areas
- Data sharing
- Long-term trial sites
- Operational experts
- Investigate drone spraying opportunities (+/- mapping with AI?)

FFM Vic

- Working on coordination with communities

HVP

- Support local (x2) community workshops in Upper Murray and Ovens

Murray Local Land Services

- Can assist as liaison with stakeholder within the Murray region

NSW DPIRD

- Information on the 9 European blackberry species in NSW
- Mapped records of blackberry in NSW

Parks Vic

- Work with community groups for better outcomes

Softwood Working Group

- Through open questioning holding our members accountable to acting on this issue

University of Wollongong – Dr Sonia Graham

- Advice on how to set up new collective action program

Victorian Blackberry Taskforce

- Blackberry Action Data Info System (BADIS) as a basis
- Website resources
- Cross-border pilot partnership project
- Local partnership group action model

Ideas and Thoughts

- Consistent practice and processes
- Re-establish management of a national body
- Create industry standards
- Best practice management
- Identify process management needs

FFM Vic

- Consistent planning to support blackberry control post fire

Coordinated and collaborative on-ground delivery

- Prepare plan for collaborative action
- On-ground collaborative community approach
- Map extent and severity and type of blackberry across the MRFH area and identify smaller area to target initial efforts

Supported by community groups

- Operations – participation via support for citizen science initiatives via Landcare
- Farming and RFS control spread and keep fire trails open

RFS

- Provide fire response and support

Other thoughts

- Finding a value or a product of value from blackberries
- Chemical research – new chemicals – new application methods
- Bring spread of blackberries under control

Funding

Offers

Agriwealth

- Already make contributions through industry levies
- Will give in-kind funding

AgVic – Rae Kwong

- Co-investment in biocontrol of blackberry research but need 70% industry funding

Diana Gibbs

- Preparation of business case(s) to support funding applications

FCNSW

- Substitute current operations for alternatives

FFM Vic

- Work with “groups” for funding

Hub

- Data to influence and advise government

HVP

- Support local (x2) community workshops in Upper Murray and Ovens

Parks Vic

- Continue to chase funding opportunities – Good Neighbour, biodiversity funds, etc

Softwood Working Group

- Advocating AFWI to fund blackberry research

Ideas and Thoughts

- More ongoing funding needed
- Activities to boost farmers morale, to encourage continuous on-farm activities to reduce blackberries. This would be most effective through grant funding for potentially trucks, drones, alternative strategies
- Jobs?
- Meetings with RFS senior leadership team to fund clearing of fire trails
- Consider a blackberry levy eg Skeleton Weed program in WA or Melton Shire
- Crown Lands – consider collaborative funding arrangements for cross-tenure projects
- Lobby for funding, use economic data
- Prepare application to AFWI
- Collective action – develop a R&D strategy for blackberry to determine priorities for research and identify funding co-investors

Advocacy

Offers

Agriwealth

- Shall advocate for Good Neighbour Programs
- Shall advocate for biological controls

Albury City

- Community consultation and education

Alpine Shire

- Connections with local Landcare and environmental groups, catchment authority etc
- Community – ground level education and advocacy

CFA

- Assist engagement between NSW and Victoria- fire risk specific

GrazeAway

- 20 years’ plus experience with proven examples of weed control of blackberries with goats

Softwood Working Group

- Advocating on behalf of forest industry and local government for support and action
- Advocating for money and solutions

Victorian Blackberry Taskforce

- Support for research innovation (gene editing)
- Support for biocontrol

Towong Shire

- Could engage in community education and support

Diana Gibbs

- Further economic analysis

Ideas and Thoughts

- Targeted and coordinated engagement
- Contribute to sharing messages via Landcare events, messaging, Mitta to Murray Landcare
- Get Pip Courtney (Land Line) to do an episode on blackberry to raise profile of issue
- Wider communication – seek general public support
- Promote issue – raise profile – reduce apathy
- RFS to assist in community engagement of biosecurity risks, ie volunteers on fires
- Lobby government for increasing investment for invasive species management (notably blackberries)
- Crown Land – consider being a part of a future NSW Blackberry Taskforce
- Lobby for increased investments in biocontrol and technology

Other

Offers

Albury City

- Human / people approach (jobs)

AgVic – Dr Rae Kwong

- Biological control expertise
- Quarantine facility
- Access to research agencies in Europe
- AgVic co-investment
- Collaboration with other Australian biocontrol agencies

CSU / Gulbali Institute

- Research capacity in spatial analysis, prediction, social license, and integrated pest management

GrazeAway:

- Improved habitat through managed grazing with goats
- Proven fuel load reduction of both problematic exotic species but also bushland
- Establishment of native grasses and sedges through grazing with goals once exotic weeds have been controlled

FCNSW:

- Trial sites
- Trial labour
- In-kind support (data/field verification) to support biological control research project (Rae)
- Species mapping on FCNSW land
- Work with RFS to utilise new Geiger Mode LiDAR for cross-tenure blackberry (fuel) mapping

Riverine Plains – Sophie Hanna

- Community awareness – we can share information from researchers and others to farmers to promote why managing blackberries is important beyond the farm level

University of Wollongong - Human Geography students to:

- Study what motivates people to control blackberry
- What elicits an emotional response to blackberry
- Conduct social network analyses etc

Ideas and Thoughts

- Advocate for investment in research and innovation:
 - Biocontrol
 - Genetic engineering
- Create links with stakeholders not currently caught by management approach, eg environmental activity groups like bike riders on the Murray to Mountains
- RFS to assist in research on fire behaviour in different terrain and vegetation types
- Government and forestry need input to match the effort and money farmers are investing to contain blackberries on their property
- Farmers are at the eradication and containment level, while over the fence in government land and forestry they are running wild
- Capture robust economic figures that have been found and distribute communications to all stakeholders and community to promote the value of proactive management
- Traditional Owner consultation
- Environmental Education programs
- MRFH - media and marketing team

Conclusion

The Murray Region Forestry Hub Strategic Blackberry Forum demonstrated a strong commitment to collaborative action against blackberry infestations. Offers of support from government agencies, industry, and community organisations position the Murray Region to develop and implement a cohesive, long-term strategy for sustainable blackberry management, with a focus on protecting biodiversity, reducing fire risk, exploring long term support for biocontrols, and supporting economic productivity across diverse land tenures.