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SPECIAL THEME: PLANT CONSERVATION AND LINEAR VEGETATION REMNANTS

Leading practice in the environmental management of New South Wales linear reserves—the role of the NSW Roadside Environment Committee

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Linear reserves in New South Wales (NSW) include roadsides, travelling stock reserves, rail corridors and infrastructure easements (e.g. for electricity lines, gas pipelines).

The roadsides of the approximately 180 000 km of public roads in NSW and the estimated 2.27 million hectares of the Travelling Stock Reserve network are each estimated to comprise about 3% of the State's land area. These, coupled with rail corridors and infrastructure easements, mean the total area of linear reserves is approximately 6.5% of the State (compared with 8% in NSW national parks and nature reserves).

Apart from covering a large area, the State's linear reserves contain significant native biodiversity, including ecological communities that are not protected in national parks, public reserves or private land. In rural areas, linear reserves also often constitute the only remaining intact natural environments in the district due to extensive clearing for broadacre farming and other land uses. Linear reserves additionally provide invaluable wildlife habitats and corridors, especially when linked with other native vegetation remnants in the landscape where they provide connectivity and may assist in addressing threats associated with climate change.

Linear reserves have many values and purposes including:

- transport routes (e.g. for stock);
- agistment during drought;
- fire control lines;
- carbon sinks;
- places of Indigenous culture and heritage;
- sites of historic heritage;
- aesthetic appeal;
- recreational opportunities; and
- research and educational sites.

The NSW Roadside Environment Committee

In recognition of these values, the NSW Government established the NSW Roadside Environment Committee (the Committee) in 1994

as an umbrella body to promote and coordinate leading practice in linear reserve environmental management across the State. The following organisations, including land managers, are currently represented on the Committee:

- NSW Roads and Traffic Authority;
- NSW Rural Fire Service;
- RailCorp;
- Country Energy;
- NSW Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water;
- Local Government and Shires Association of NSW;
- NSW Nature Conservation Council;
- NSW Land and Property Management Authority;
- Livestock Health and Pest Authorities;
- Institute of Public Works Engineering Australia; and
- NSW catchment management authorities.

The Committee meets on a quarterly basis including at rural and regional locations. Its operations are funded by the Roads and Traffic Authority with secretariat support services currently contracted to Molino Stewart Pty Ltd.



Members of the NSW Roadside Environment Committee inspect direct seed drilling activities.

Photo: Josie Stokes

Since its inception in 1994, the Committee has actively worked on its charter. An initial phase involved researching leading practice in linear reserve environmental management. This research culminated in the production of several guides and fact sheets for the use of local councils and other linear reserve managers. For example, in 1996 the Committee produced a *Roadside Handbook* which provided environmental guidelines for road construction and maintenance workers.

From 2004–08, the Committee managed a large project grant from the NSW Environmental Trust to support local councils in assessing native vegetation

along their roads and producing roadside vegetation management plans. As a result of this project about two-thirds of local councils in the State now have these or similar plans. Since then, the Committee has concentrated on reviewing and consolidating work undertaken to support leading practice over the past 15 years.

A recurrent feature of the Committee has been its ability to partner and network with local councils and other stakeholders across NSW to encourage improved linear reserve management. For example, the Committee has supported several important stakeholder initiatives such as the roadside environment project developed by the Hunter Central Coast Regional Environmental Management Strategy. It distributes its electronic newsletter to over 150 stakeholder organisations to share ideas and research on linear reserve environmental management.

Further details about the Committee and its guidelines for assessment, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation can be found at the Committee website at <<http://www.rta.nsw.gov.au/rec>>

Issues and challenges

The Committee has developed and is implementing its strategic plan to help address several issues and challenges related to linear reserves and their management.

Balancing road safety with conservation

An ongoing issue for road managers is how to balance the requirements of road safety with the need to protect and conserve significant roadside native vegetation. The Committee commissioned consultants ARRB Group Ltd to research this issue. As a result, through its member organisation the Institute of Public Works Engineering Australia, it is currently trialling risk assessment spreadsheets that may assist local councils with this issue.

Fire management

Fire management is another important issue that linear reserve managers need to address. Linear reserves can present either potential ignition points for bushfires or can act as a control line and access for fire fighting. They also may require the application of appropriate fire regimes to conserve native biodiversity. Committee members are reviewing their approach to fire management in linear reserves, particularly in the light of the recommendations of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission report.

Weed and litter management

Other issues addressed in the Committee strategic plan include weed management and litter reduction programs. The Committee has also identified several challenges and included actions related to them in the plan. Inappropriate activities by infrastructure and reserve maintenance staff, such as excessive clearing, spraying, mowing and trimming in high conservation value areas, can lead to

further degradation of linear reserve environments. To respond to this challenge, the Committee has supported the training of operational and maintenance staff in some local councils and is currently identifying new strategies to broaden this initiative.

Roadside vegetation management plans

The Committee recently surveyed NSW local councils to evaluate the extent of implementation of roadside vegetation management plans, with a view to improvement and filling any gaps. It is concerned that although many local councils had developed these plans, they were not being fully implemented. The Committee proposes to work with councils to support the review and implementation of the plans.

Communication

Another challenge is to effectively communicate leading practices in linear reserve environmental management to all stakeholders. The Committee's communication plan includes strategies to provide access to leading practice initiatives through the Committee website, electronic distribution of the Committee newsletter, encouraging professional networking and support for leading practice awards. The Committee encourages the use of Significant Roadside Environment Area signage to increase awareness of high conservation roadsides both with maintenance staff and the general public.

Conclusion

Significant progress has been made since 1994 in improving the management of linear reserves across NSW. An ongoing commitment from land and infrastructure managers and other stakeholders to use leading practices is required to continue this progress. The Committee will continue to promote the implementation of leading practices in linear reserve management through partnerships, education, research and support.



Example of a Significant Roadside Environment Area sign promoted by the NSW Roadside Environment Committee.

Photo: Albury City Council.