

# Media Release

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## MEDIA RELEASE

### MESQUITE and DEVILS ROPE

THE NEXT major flood could sweep millions of seeds of one of Australia's worst environmental and agricultural weeds, mesquite, into the Darling River, causing an environmental catastrophe along the lower reaches of the river, and the Murray River below Wentworth.

Armed with vicious spikes up to 2 centimetres long, Mesquite (*Prosopis* species), is of Mexican and central American origins. It has already infested large tracts of grazing land north and east of Broken Hill. According to Mark King, chair of the Lower Murray Darling Catchment Management Authority and Wentworth Shire Councillor, who addressed a meeting of the Murray Darling Association this week, some of the association's member shires have severe infestations of mesquite, one of 20 declared Weeds of National Significance in Australia.

The Lower Murray Darling Catchment Management Authority is conducting an intensive eradication program funded by the Australian Government under the Defeating the Weed Menace Programme on 26 properties in the Broken Hill area, including infestations on the city's southern margins. The BHCC is also undertaking a separate campaign to clean up the Broken Hill Common, east of the city's airport. The project has been running for two years, and contractors have sprayed an estimated 150,000 mesquite trees.

The program also involves the Western Catchment Management Authority, NSW Prickle Bush Working Group, NSW Department of Primary Industries, the NSW Department of Environment and Climate Change, the Western Lands Commission.

"Up to 95 per cent of mesquite has been killed on some properties, but major infestations remain on several others - "The worst infestation is probably large enough to absorb almost our entire annual budget," said Mr King.

The program was aiming to eliminate all mesquite from the catchment within a decade, to prevent the prickly menace forming the massive impenetrable thickets that have made huge areas of western Queensland, inaccessible to livestock, larger feral pests like goats and pigs, and impassable even to four-wheel drive vehicles. Mark Kingsays mesquite is thick enough in some places to prevent graziers mustering their stock. The larger stands are densely interlaced that sprayers on foot cannot get inside them, by cutting access tracks into stands of trees.

"Mesquite has first call on scarce soil moisture, and by shading native groundlayer, denuding the soil of its protective ground layer of native herbs and grasses" said Mark King.

Some mesquite thickets around Broken Hill are already impassable to spray contractors' vehicles, forcing workers to carry heavy spray packs with a herbicide-diesel oil mix long

distances in hot, dry conditions in late October, November, and December; when the plants are growing vigorously and are at their most vulnerable..

Mark King said drenching a large mesquite tree to ensure it died often could take the entire contents of an 18-litre backpack, necessitating a long trek back to a truck.

The spray teams locate stands and record the position on a hand-held Global Positioning System unit. GPS coordinates are later loaded onto a computer and sent to the LMD CMA Office in Buronga for mapping, which clearly shows the association of mesquite with waterways. These coordinates will be used in follow on work in later years and allow the distribution of plants to be compared.

Sprayed areas must be monitored for several years, to ensure there is no germination or regrowth. Mesquite seeds can remain viable in harsh conditions for 20 years or more - so even after all the trees have been removed, the soil retain a bank of viable seeds that could be picked up and washed downstream in a flood.

When the Dept of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, (DAFF) funding for the three year eradication program runs out, property owners will be required to monitor their land for regrowth. A number of landholders have been trained to use the GPS system, and upload the data to Buronga.

The LMD CMA is now turning its attention to another imported prickly horror, a cactus called Devil's Rope (*Cylindropuntia imbricata*) which has hooked ends on its thorns that hook into the arms of kangaroos. According to Mark King, when the animals attempt to remove the spikes with their teeth, the spikes lodge in their cheeks, causing severe pain, bleeding, and in many cases, infection and death. The thorns can easily penetrate thick rubber on car tyres, breaking off whole "arms" of the plants, and transporting them to uninfested areas. A large stand of Devil's rope occurs just south of the Coomba roadhouse, between Wentworth and Broken Hill, and also infests land in the Lake Mungo area.

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