**Victorian Serrated Tussock Working Party**

**Standard Operating Procedure:**

**Extension Projects**

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# Project Statement

Service providers contracted by the Victorian Serrated Tussock Working Party (VSTWP) perform a key function in the delivery of the Victorian serrated tussock program consistent with the Victorian Serrated Tussock Strategy 2018 – 2023.

The service provider is responsible for delivering property inspections and extension (educational) services to targeted communities affected by serrated tussock (*Nassella trichotoma*), to raise awareness, promote best practice management, and encourage communities to voluntarily manage the invasive species.

Service providers will form a strong working relationship with the Victorian Serrated Tussock Working Party and various stakeholders including private landholders, Landcare, industry, community groups, local government, Catchment Management Authorities, and Agriculture Victoria (AgVic).

# Extension Services

1. Develop partnerships with stakeholders in the project area to communicate key messages and effectively work towards a common outcome.

Stakeholders include but are not limited to:

* + Local government staff responsible for weed control on public and private land,
	+ Landcare groups and Landcare networks in and near the project area,
	+ Relevant staff from the AgVic region,
	+ Linear Reserve Managers,
	+ Relevant Catchment Management Authority staff.

Partnerships should be developed early in the project and continue for the project’s duration.

To foster collaboration, the service provider is encouraged to promote stakeholder projects which are complementary to the VSTWP Extension Program, e.g. Melbourne Water Stream frontage Program, Council Rate Rebate Schemes, Landcare Incentive Programs.

1. Deliver awareness raising events and activities in the specified project area, which include but are not limited to:
* Project Launch; field days or information sessions,
* Media releases targeting local newspapers and social media,
* Articles and ‘Good News’ story for use by the VSTWP on the website or in the Tussock Times.

Awareness raising events and activities should be delivered early in the project. This is intended to promote the program and engage landholders who may consent to a free property inspection.

All content media developed by the service provider must be approved by the VSTWP Executive Officer and if required the Chair, prior to distribution.

If the free use of a venue cannot be sourced for information sessions/field days, the VSTWP may consider contributing funds toward venue hire. Prior approval from the VSTWP Executive Officer must be obtained. Where on-ground events cannot be delivered then efforts should be made to deliver an online event or attend relevant online community meetings.

1. Distribute a letter from the VSTWP (signed by the service provider and VSTWP Chair) to all landholders in the project area. Template provided. This letter should:
* Explain the intention of the project,
* Offer free property assessment services,
* Promote any extension events being held,
* Provide the contact details of the serrated tussock Extension Officer,
* Be supported with extension material supplied by the VSTWP.

Landholder engagement and distribution of letters should be done early in the project. Any correspondence using the VSTWP letterhead or signatures from members must be approved by the VSTWP Executive Officer and if required the Chair, prior to distribution. The VSTWP will provide letterhead, envelopes and extension material on request.

It is the service provider’s responsibility to contact landholders in the project area. Landowner contact details may be obtained via council, door knocks, letterbox drops, the post office or other means.

1. Assess properties for serrated tussock and deliver extension services to consenting landholders in the project area, at no cost to the landholder. Extension services should be provided early in the project and continue for the project’s duration.

This involves but is not limited to:

* Property assessments to determine the presence and distribution of serrated tussock.
* Estimating percentage cover of serrated tussock, mapping of infestations and providing GIS data to the VSTWP.
* Establish and maintain photo points on select sites capturing before and after treatment (if agreed by the landholder).
* Providing professional best practice management advice. (Never provide specific advice for the use herbicides. Always refer land managers to the product label, and to chemical suppliers or agronomists for further advice.)
* Supplying the landholder with extension material (this will be provided by the VSTWP).
* When required providing the landholder with a property map detailing the location of serrated tussock plants on their property.
* If required provision of property management plan (template available) for landholders requiring greater assistance, such as heavily infested properties or recalcitrant landholders.
* Follow-up property inspections for properties where serrated tussock is found, to determine the level of serrated tussock control undertaken by the landowner
* Follow-up telephone calls and/or visits with landholders when required.
* Collection and collation of data for every property in the project area, as outlined in the inspection reporting spreadsheet provided.

As per best practice management techniques serrated tussock infestations should be identified and controlled early to prevent seed development and drop.

Prior to accessing railway reserves for assessment, the contractor must inform the responsible authority e.g. VicTrack or VLine. To conform to their policies and procedures they will want to accompany you onto the site. All properties must be inspected with due care and weed hygiene and biosecurity measures must be implemented.

# Landholder Engagement

To source information and landholder contact details, engage with local stakeholders such as Landcare, Council Environmental Officers (or equivalent) and key local contacts - local champions are an invaluable resource. Other avenues include the local CFA, electoral roll, local telephone directory and post office.

A reasonable attempt should be made to contact the landowner and arrange access to the property. This may include written letter, telephone call, calling slip and business card left at property, enquiries with neighbouring landowners and community groups. To catch them at home consider varying the times of day you visit or possibly call by on the weekend. Neighbours are a good source of information and will often provide information on the best times to catch landholders at home, a contact phone number and any potential safety issues.

If the entry gate is padlocked, or there is a ‘do not enter sign’ on the gate, there are intimidating dogs, or you just do not feel comfortable entering; leave a calling slip, business card and extension material in the letterbox. If there is no letter box but a house is present, leave at the gate in a visible, secure position.

Control and management advice is to be specific to each situation and in alignment with best practice management. If herbicide application is suggested, then advised land managers to consult a chemical supplier or agronomist for specific details, and to always read and adhere to the directions provided on the product label. If further information is requested, you may provide the AgVic information note *A guide to using agricultural chemicals in Victoria: Ground-based spray application*.

Where serrated tussock is a regionally prohibited weed, make sure to advise landowners that infestation data will be referred to AgVic for follow-up.

# Property Assessments

Where access to a property cannot be gained, attempt to assess the property from the boundary fence or while visiting neighbouring properties.

It is suggested that where a property can be observed from the boundary and where you are confident that **no** serrated tussock is evident, then a minimum of 2 visits to the property be carried-out, in an attempt to engage with the landholder. For properties where serrated tussock **is** visible, or where you are unsure if serrated tussock is present, it is expected that all possible methods of contacting the landholder be exhausted, if still unsuccessful please record details of the property and infestation for future referral to Agriculture Victoria.

During a property assessment it is a good idea to have landholders confirm the property boundaries particularly along unused roads, waterways and crown land allotments. The local council may also be able to provide further advice.

Extension Officers are not expected to manually remove the plants. However, if there are only a small number of serrated tussock plants on a property, they may elect to do so (at their own discretion). When removing plants, it is advised that the landholder be present, so they may become familiar with identifying serrated tussock and know where the plants occur on their property for future management.

Officers are required to record all details in the VSTWP reporting spreadsheet. This spreadsheet will assist officer to coordinate extension activities and provides critical details for referrals for regulatory support. Where an assessment from the boundary occurred, this should be noted in the reporting spreadsheet along with relevant comments. Comments may include notes on the parts of the property observed/ not observed, any factors relevant to effective serrated tussock identification (e.g. long grass), or the likely occurrence of serrated tussock (e.g. cropping).

# Voluntary Compliance Assessments

The following process is provided as a guide for property assessments and referrals. Where there is uncertainty it is recommended to discuss any issues with the VSTWP Executive Officer.

Several factors need to be considered when assessing a property to decide what is fair and reasonable, including:

* the density of the infestation,
* the amount of work completed,
* landowner intent and capacity, and
* the location of the infestation, considering neighbouring properties and prevailing wind.

Considering these factors, it is expected that at least 90% of a manageable area of serrated tussock is controlled.

The Property Assessment Matrix (fig 1) is to be used to assist in determining the type of follow-up action as detailed in figure 2. If there is doubt about the type of action to take, it is best to select a higher priority or discuss with the Executive Officer.

Control works may be staged on larger properties, however it is also important to ensure large infestations are followed-up. It is therefore necessary for infestations that require ongoing management be referred to AgVic for monitoring at the completion of the project.

When all attempts to inspect a property have failed and the presence of serrated tussock is likely:

* In year 1; refer the property to AgVic for an official letter and attempt to inspect the property in the next season,
* In year 2; refer the property to AgVic for assessment.



**Figure 1.** Property Assessment Matrix



**Figure 2.** Follow-up actions.

# Safety

It is recommended that you introduce yourself to the local police to explain what you are doing, provide your vehicle details, and an estimate of how long you will be working in the area. This is not only for your safety but may assist the police if a community member calls to report an unfamiliar vehicle seen visiting properties in the area. The police may also be able to provide insight into properties to avoid entering.

This position may require contractors to work alone. For your general safety it is advised that contractors have a suitable check-in procedure to manage risk, notifying a contact at regular intervals. Prior to heading out for the day to let someone know where you are planning to go and when you plan to return home. If you have a smart phone, consider using a GPS smart tracking application.

# Data Collection

Collection and collation of data for every property in the project area, as outlined in the inspection reporting excel template provided. This spreadsheet will assist officer to coordinate extension activities and provides critical details for referrals. Reports must be in line with the ‘VSTWP Voluntary Compliance Assessment’.

Where an assessment from the boundary occurred, this should be noted in the reporting spreadsheet along with relevant comments. Comments may include notes on the parts of the property observed/ not observed, any factors relevant to effective serrated tussock identification (e.g. long grass), or the likely occurrence of serrated tussock (e.g. cropping).

Upon completion of the project, provide the VSTWP with the final report, data capture spreadsheet and all GIS data and photographs relating to the project area.

# Reporting

Reports should not contain landowner details. To assist with planning for compliance referrals the Extension Officer is to forward each report to the designated AgVic contact. As a guide reports may be structured as follows:

* Project Overview
* Stakeholder Partnerships (Including any lead agency for the area)
* Awareness Raising Activities
* Landholder Extension, including:
* Number of properties inspections undertaken.
* Number of properties with serrated tussock infections.
* Number of properties in each property assessment category (Very low / Low / Medium / High).
* Recommendations: The number of properties referred to AgVic for complaint letter and/or regulatory action.
* Issues and Constraints.