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Tel: 08 8951 6211

Email: clc234@clc.org.au

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Northern Territory Government

Weed Management Team

Department of Lands, Planning and Environment

GPO Box 3000

Darwin NT 0801

Attention: Weed Management Team

Submission on the Development of Buffel Grass (*Cenchrus ciliaris*) Weed Management Plan

The Central Land Council (CLC) represents over 24,000 Aboriginal people and has statutory responsibilities for approximately 780,000 square kilometres of land across the southern half of the Northern Territory.

Our statutory functions include:

- a) ascertaining and expressing the wishes and opinion of Aboriginal people living in the area of the CLC as to the management of Aboriginal land in the area;
- b) protecting the interests of traditional Aboriginal owners of Aboriginal land;
- c) assisting Aboriginal people to take measures likely to assist in the protection of sacred sites on land (whether or not Aboriginal land); and
- d) consulting with traditional Aboriginal owners of Aboriginal land about any proposals relating to the use of that land.

CLC is also a native title representative body under the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth) (Native Title Act) for the southern half of the NT.

We administer a range of programs for the benefit of our constituents in relation to environmental management, community development, governance, economic participation, cultural heritage, and customary practices.

Buffel grass now stands as one of the most destructive threats to all these values. Our 90 elected Council members passed a resolution in October 2023 (attached in full at **Appendix A**), identifying buffel grass as an existential threat:

'Buffel grass is destroying country. It is threatening our communities and our culture. Aboriginal people did not bring buffel to our country. It is a foreign plant introduced from overseas. But we are the ones who are suffering most from its impacts. The extent of destruction caused by this grass is threatening our land rights and native title rights.'



Our Council are calling for urgent action to manage and reduce the spread of buffel grass working in collaboration with traditional owners and native title holders.

The CLC strongly recommends that the Northern Territory Government:

Develop a Weed Management Plan that enables:

1. Continued involvement of traditional owners and the Central Land Council in all stages.
2. Mapping the distribution of buffel grass, monitoring its spread, and identification of priority protection zones.
3. Urgent investment in measures to prevent its spread into currently buffel-free areas and priority protection zones.
4. Research and development of control methods, including potential biological controls, for infested areas.
5. Investment in proven management strategies and new research to reduce risks such as extreme fire behaviour, ecosystem transformation, loss of threatened species, and damage to sacred sites.
6. Continued and expanded investment in Indigenous-led land management programs.

Detrimental Impacts

Buffel grass is a transformer species, fundamentally altering fire regimes, ecosystem structure, and landscape character. Its impacts span multiple sectors:

- **Environment:** Displaces native flora, reduces biodiversity, and is listed as a key threat in recovery plans for at least 31 species under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (Cth)*.
- **Culture:** Destroys sacred sites, ceremony grounds, bush foods, and medicinal plants, limiting Traditional Owners' ability to care for and gather food from Country and pass on knowledge.
- **Tourism and Arts:** Degrades iconic landscapes and cultural tourism experiences.
- **Health and Safety:** Increases wildfire frequency and intensity, generates hazardous smoke, and has caused poor air quality events (e.g. in Alice Springs), posing risks to lives and triggering evacuations.
- **Infrastructure and Economy:** Threatens transport, energy, and communications infrastructure, increases fire management costs, and jeopardises renewable energy projects. Buffel grass is one of the major threats to remote outstations, where it increases the incidence of fire and incurs major maintenance and repair expenses for outstation residents, as well as fire authorities with a responsibility to manage fire risk.

These impacts occur across all land tenures, including municipal areas, conservation reserves, Aboriginal Land Trusts and native title land, infrastructure corridors, and peri-urban zones.

Position on Buffel Grass Eradication

The CLC does not advocate for the complete eradication of buffel grass. Our priority is to prevent further spread and reduce its impacts in affected landscapes, particularly on:



- Aboriginal land
- National parks and conservation reserves
- Townships
- Roadsides
- Infrastructure corridors
- Outstations and other remote infrastructure

We are committed to working respectfully with pastoralists and all landholders to promote resilient rangelands that benefit everyone.

Summary and Recommendations

A Buffel Grass Weed Management Plan should:

- Recognise the severity of impacts across the Northern Territory and sectors.
- Empower Aboriginal-led land management to protect cultural heritage and biodiversity.
- Strengthen and coordinate currently under-resourced control efforts.
- Support constructive, cross-sector dialogue without imposing unnecessary regulation on beneficial uses.
- Prevent further spread into high-value intact landscapes.
- Address cross-tenure challenges such as roadside spread, fire risk, and impacts within parks, conservation reserves, townships, and cultural sites.
- Provide certainty and a clear framework to protect priority areas from incursion.

The CLC stands ready to work with governments, industry, research institutions, and communities to protect the health, safety, and cultural vitality of our rangelands.

Yours sincerely,

Central Land Council



Appendix A

Buffel Grass Resolution – Yulara Pulka (October 2023)



CENTRAL LAND COUNCIL

RESOLUTION

Yulara Pulka, 4 October 2023

Buffel grass is destroying country. It is threatening our communities and our culture.

Aboriginal people did not bring buffel to our country. It is a foreign plant introduced from overseas. But we are the ones who are suffering most from its impacts. The extent of destruction caused by this grass is threatening our land rights and native title rights.

It is choking country and no good to eat for our native animals, like kangaroo. It is pushing these animals off our traditional country. Our bush foods, like bush tomato, don't grow because of the buffel grass. In some places now we don't see spinifex or our native flowers – just buffel grass, as far as the eye can see. In some places, buffel grass is so thick it is damaging our rock art. Fires from buffel grass are doing this too.

We try to manage buffel grass with traditional burning. But it doesn't work – this grass burns too hot and it comes back too quickly.

The Central Land Council endorses the Umuwa Statement (2021) and the statement made by Rene Kulitja on behalf of the custodians of the Uluru-Kata Tjuta, Kaiti-Petermann and Watarrka in 2022 (attached). These statements describe in heartbreakingly detail the impacts buffel is having on our country and our people.

We remember country before buffel. We want our young people to know country as it was and should be.

The Central Land Council calls on the Northern Territory and Federal Governments to take urgent action.

We ask that the NT Government declare buffel grass a weed. This is an essential first step that will be a catalyst for further action.

The next steps must include:

- i) Recommending to the Federal Government that buffel is listed as a Weed of National Significance when the new National Established Weed Priorities (NEWP) Framework is established. Buffel is not just a problem in the NT. It is already found in every mainland state. It is possible it could invade up to 70 per cent of the continent.
- ii) The development of a Weed Management Plan. The development of the plan must involve traditional owners and the Central Land Council.
- iii) Mapping the distribution of buffel grass across the country. We need to know where the grass is now, how fast it is spreading and where it is likely to spread to. This will help target management efforts and know if we are making a difference.
- iv) Urgent government investment in strategies to stop the spread of buffel to areas that are still buffel-free. We need to protect country that is still intact.



- v) Urgent government investment in research and development to manage buffel in areas that are already infested. This should include research into biological controls.
- vi) Urgent government investment in known strategies and new research to manage the risks posed by buffel. This includes managing the devastating fire risks of buffel infestations, the transformation of ecosystems, impacts on threatened species, and the destruction of special and sacred places.
- vii) Continue investment in Indigenous-led land management.

When our old people sit with our rangers to plan work on their country, in buffel-affected areas, it is often the number one threat. Rangers work hard to reduce the impacts of buffel on country and culture but they can't keep up.

We have seen in South Australia that a weed declaration and investment has helped them in their efforts and made them a national leader on buffel grass management.

Here in the Northern Territory, we also need laws and investment to help us manage this destructive grass.

This year we are experiencing a catastrophic fire season fuelled by climate change. Buffel grass is making it worse.

We love our country and we must protect it.

We can't wait any longer for action.