



VICTORIAN BLACKBERRY **TASKFORCE**

Blackberry Biological Control Update. May 2016

One of the roles of The Victorian Blackberry Taskforce (VBT) is to oversee the implementation of the Victorian Blackberry Strategy (VBS). The VBS recognises that blackberry is a complex problem which can't be solved but can be managed by limiting growth and spread. In order to achieve this objective it is the role of the VBT to support and encourage research into biological methods of blackberry control.

Biological control of blackberry commenced in 1977. The rust fungus *Phragmidium violaceum* was legally released in 1990. It is host specific and causes severe defoliation in suitable conditions - cool summers with high rainfall. Repeated defoliation eventually reduces plant vigour, reproductive capacity and the production of daughter plants. However, Blackberry rust fungus is ineffective in areas where blackberry occurs under a tree canopy or in areas with rainfall less than 800mm per annum.

Purple Blotch Disease (pbd) is endemic to Europe. It causes lesions on the canes which affect the vascular system of the plant and once infected, the plant remains infected. It results in cane die back, reduced vigour, reduced reproductive capacity and eventually the death of the plant.

Research commenced in 2004 supported by Federal and State funding, first in Europe and then in 2006 in New Zealand. This funding ceased in May 2012 and there is currently no research on classical biological control of blackberry being undertaken in Australia.

In Western Australia a research program is investigating the potential of a *phytophthora* species for blackberry control in flood prone areas.

If funding becomes available again the search for suitable strains of pbd for biological control in Australia will continue. The public land estate, private remnant native forest and commercial tree crops would benefit if the research were to be continued and pbd found suitable for release. These are usually difficult areas in which to implement successful chemical control programs, for a variety of reasons, specifically damage to non target species and access.

There have been excellent results in blackberry control on cleared farmland through collaborative community weed programs which restore productive capacity and protect biodiversity values. The VBT Community Partnership Program, which enables community action and builds capacity for cooperative weed management at a local level, is one of these programs. Private and public land managers work together on interface infestations when resources allow, however the current approach is not producing sustainable reductions in infestations and another tool is needed.

The VBT is working with Biosecurity Victoria to determine if the research can re commence and how funding could to be sourced to do this.

A project proposal was prepared for the VBT and submitted to the Australian Weeds Committee to seek financial contributions from other States as blackberry is a Weed of National Significance. To date there have been no positive responses to this proposal.

The National Weeds Research Summary 2011-2012 compiled by the Rural Industries Research Development Corporation recommends that the pbd research be continued as the results to date are promising.

Losses to the Australian economy through reduced productivity and control costs are estimated at \$95-\$100 million per year (Page and Lacey 2006). Losses to the Victorian economy are estimated at \$35 million per year.

For further information see
www.vicblackberrytaskforce.com.au