

Victorian Blackberry Taskforce

TACKLING BLACKBERRY

SIX
SUCCESSFUL & COMPELLING
CASE STUDIES



The Victorian Blackberry Taskforce (VBT) is committed to working with communities and partner agencies to reduce the growth and spread of blackberry in Victoria. The objectives of the Victorian Blackberry Strategy are very clear and identify education, collaboration and innovation as the basis for achieving a sustained reduction in the areas of productive land and natural areas affected by blackberry.

The Case Studies featured here demonstrate the determination of communities and individual landholders, in a range of circumstances, to find a way of tackling blackberry to reclaim and restore land.

The collaborative approach highlighted in the studies demonstrates the value of the support offered by the VBT through various avenues. This enables people to access and use best practice information in order to implement the most appropriate management plan for their particular situation.

Each Case Study is an inspiration to those who have yet to start their journey to bring blackberry under control and use the recovered land for productive or conservation purposes. The participants demonstrate that no matter how difficult or daunting the task, having a goal and support is the key to success.



This project is funded through the Established Pest Animals and Weeds initiative, part of the Australian Government's Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper, the government's plan for stronger farmers and a stronger economy.



Victorian Blackberry **Taskforce**

CASE STUDY 01 CUDGEWA LANDHOLDERS, KELLY AND MURRAY	:01
CASE STUDY 02 NORTH EAST BLACKBERRY ACTION GROUP	:05
CASE STUDY 03 NORTHERN YARRA BLACKBERRY ACTION GROUP	:11
CASE STUDY 04 YARRA RANGES LANDHOLDER	:17
CASE STUDY 05 BARKERS CREEK BLACKBERRY AND GORSE ACTION GROUP	:21
CASE STUDY 06 BARKERS CREEK LANDHOLDERS, JUDY AND LOU	:27

CASE STUDY 01
CUDGEWA LANDHOLDERS, KELLY & MURRAY

Kelly and Murray have had their 170 acre property in Cudgewa, northeast Victoria, for just four years. In that time, they’ve transformed it from being a landscape dominated by blackberry, to one that now pays its way as an agistment for up to 50 head of Wagyu cattle.



Purchasing a problem

Kelly and Murray bought the property from a previous owner who had let blackberry get out of control. Covering the entire hillside, the problem was so bad that the original owner had been issued with a Land Management Notice by the Victorian government, requiring him to take action. Instead, the owner sold it to Kelly and Murray. The Land Management Notice did not transfer with the sale of the property. Unfortunately, the blackberry infestation did.

“When we first took over here the blackberries were pretty much down to the main road. You were lucky to run 10, 20 head of cattle here ... if that.

Prior to making the purchase, Kelly had sought advice from the local North East Blackberry Action Group (NEBAG) committee member, Lyn Coultson, including what the costs for control might be.

“When we first originally took on the property and we had to physically walk up the hill to look at what we were going to buy, I sort of shook my head and didn’t think it was doable. But my partner’s got a lot more faith than me ... and he’s been the workhorse driving most of this.

Getting into the thick of it

In the first year, Kelly and Murray estimate they sprayed 25,000 litres of herbicide.

“We were spraying, flat out, pushing them into heaps, burning them down, spraying again. It was just continuous.

Part of the problem in this steep country, is the difficulty of accessing many blackberry infestations. To deal with this, NEBAG offers financial support to landholders to help build or clear tracks to provide permanent access to areas of remnant vegetation to treat blackberry infestations. Kelly and Murray worked with the NEBAG project officer, Danielle, to explore options with tracks, before accessing a small amount of co-funding. This helped them to clear some existing track up to the top of their property.

“We were young farmers with a big mortgage. Tackling big projects like this is tough when you don’t have the funding behind you. We had to do tracks and things like that ... a track straight through the blackberry so we could physically get up into them ... that extra money – it goes a long way.

With tracks cut and herbicide available at reasonable rates, the key input Kelly and Murray have put in over the last four years has been their time—“we’ve spent a lot of time on it ... I used to record it, but I’ve stopped counting”. In particular, they try to make use of the window between November or December and February each year when blackberry is growing and control efforts have the most impact.



Planning for success

As well as incentive payments, NEBAG project officer Danielle worked with Kelly and Murray to develop a three-year action plan for controlling blackberry on their property. In this case, the couple already had a clear idea of what they wanted to achieve and how they'd do it; it was just a matter of documenting what they were going to do in the first year, what they hoped to do in the second and third years and what sort of assistance NEBAG could provide. Danielle says that others in the area, particularly those with less experience working with blackberry, have benefited greatly from this planned approach to control.

Kelly emphasised the importance of this planning and consistency:

“You can spray x amount each year and think that you’ve done a fantastic job, but unfortunately they can grow back and you can have twice as much in the second year. So you can’t spray for one year and have a break for the next year ... it just doesn’t work like that ... you’ve gotta be at it every year.

Payoff for the hard work

After the first two years, the couple started seeing huge improvements. Large amounts of their land were blackberry free and they were able to begin running more cattle.

“We can actually now make money off this property. When we first bought it you couldn’t generate an income off this property. And now, it’s generating an income ... it’s paying my wage, so it’s been beneficial that way.

In terms of spray alone, they’ve gone from using 25,000 litres in their first year, to around 10,000 litres for the current season. Removing the blackberry from their property also means that the weed is not spreading elsewhere — “that’s one of our main concerns and issues. It’s a noxious weed and you’ve got to get rid of it”.

With the blackberry starting to come under control, land freeing up and the government Land Management Notice removed, the value of the land itself is also likely to have improved substantially. Kelly suggests that free from blackberry and with a planning permit it might be worth twice as much, or more, as what they paid for it.

“It’s simple ... if you’ve got a hill full of blackberry you can’t graze it, you can’t make money from it. The more effort we put in, the more time and money we put in, at the end of the day, hopefully we’ll be able to generate a better income from it.

Looking to the future

With their blackberry infestations starting to come under control, Kelly and Murray are starting to look forward to putting much less time into spraying.

“Eventually, maybe five years, we should be at the stage where we’re spot spraying every year, instead of spending days and days up on that hill.

This will let them move on to making other improvements to the property, including splitting the block with fencing and planting shade and wind barriers.

“Work hard at it ... you’ve got to keep managing it and keep going at it. And it feels good ... to know now we can actually make money off it and it’s actually generating an income is amazing.



CASE STUDY 02
NORTH EAST BLACKBERRY ACTION GROUP

The North East Blackberry Action Group (NEBAG) was established over ten years ago (2005) in the prime agricultural land in the Shire of Towong, North East Victoria.



Drivers for change

While blackberries have been an issue in the area for decades, residents saw them become increasingly problematic as sheep grazing declined and the farming community aged. In the early 2000s, Landcare and other groups in the region were becoming dominated by blackberry control issues:

“People were ringing up and saying ‘can you do something about the roadside blackberry’. And every time you’d go to a Landcare meeting, it’d be about blackberry.”
- committee member

This interest spurred the formation of NEBAG as a community-led way of addressing the problem. The group started modestly, sourcing a small amount of government funding and targeting a few problem areas.

“We used the steering committee knowledge to target a few problem areas... people that really needed help. It was a good use of time to get the best for buck. Then we’ve been able to go to other areas and do the same thing.”
- committee member

These initial efforts were underpinned by a NEBAG action plan – a four-page document that outlined what the group wanted to achieve, how they were going to do it and when. As one of the committee members noted:

“[The plan] was critical. We got everyone in the same room to decide what we were actually going to do ... to get on the same page in terms of expectations.

Information and incentives

One of the central tenants of NEBAG’s approach has been to equip the community with knowledge, skills, moral support and a small amount of funding to achieve better results.

“[In the past] what groups were doing was spending money on chemicals, but there were no real results.”
- committee member

This was either a result of them not following up consistently or not using them properly.

“The chemicals are state of the art and if you use them correctly they are very effective. But people weren’t. They used dirty water, or applied them in the heat of the day ... We emphasised the need to go out one year, then follow up the next year. Otherwise you might as well not have done anything. They’ll die if you spray them, but you need to persist.”
- committee member

Part of NEBAG’s work has been simply in understanding the challenges facing landholders in the region and upskilling them in how to better implement their control program. The other part of its work has been in supporting landholders to build tracks. These tracks give landholders better long term access to (or through) blackberry infestations that are threatening remnant vegetation on their properties, enabling an annual treatment program to occur safely. Committee members see this as a way of getting long-lasting outcomes from NEBAG support:



“

We've been putting money into track building because the track never goes away. So landholders can sell and move on, or whatever, and the next bloke comes along and there's still a track there. And it makes the job so much easier, which is particularly important given the steepness and roughness of the country round here.

- committee member

This makes accessing and controlling blackberry a much more feasible proposition, particularly among an aging community. And again, follow-up is key:

“

In my case, I think my biggest year was 12,000 or 13,000 litres of spray. This year, 10 years later, I put out 105 litres of spray. I still had to walk it all and do the hard work, but I couldn't have done it without the tracks.

- committee member

Across both these areas, upskilling and incentive, a project officer has been an essential component, travelling the region for 4-6 weeks in spring and summer to raise awareness, check in with landholders and follow up with management plans.

Sparking a change and then managing to a plan

A key observation among NEBAG committee members was the value of the small incentives for access in generating more extensive and sustained blackberry control by landholders.

“

It gets it underway ... people have got the [bull]dozer out to do a few tracks and then say 'while they're here I might as well get a few more done'

It makes them want to do it now. Rather than, 'I know there's work to be done up there but I'll get to it', it gives them a start.

Committee members note that the final amount of money that landholders spend on track work often far exceeds (upwards of \$10,000) the relatively small incentive that NEBAG pays (typically \$350-\$400). While this is in part about initiating work, it also shows to the landholders that the community is supporting them in their efforts, that there's still some shared responsibility there.

Importantly, NEBAG won't fund a landholder who hasn't signed up to the program and developed a management plan.

“

It's important to have a decent plan on how you're going to do it ... so you don't rush out and spray one paddock one year and then not the next.

- committee member

Plans are worked out between each landholder and the project officer and tailored to their particular needs, capacity and circumstances. It is often a map or similar that splits the property up into sections with the plan to start section 1 in year 1, revisit it in year 2 and start section 2 and so on.

“

You've got landholders who might have had a property all their lives and they've let it go. And they stand back and look at it and say 'I don't even know where to start'. So it's as simple as saying to them 'you start on this easier section, maybe we can cut a track to improve access' or 'maybe we can put a contractor into that harder section' ... it's about splitting it up into bite-sized pieces.

- committee member

Plans also provide NEBAG with a form of leverage to help ensure landholders continue to address blackberry and maintain the work they've done.

As noted by the project officer:

“

It's an ability to ring up landholders each year and say 'just checking in to see how you're going with your plan'. It doesn't work for everyone, but it's something.

Partners, neighbours and collaboration

In addition to working directly with private landholders, NEBAG has also done important work in building collaboration among government agencies in the region and with private corporations (i.e. the local pine plantations). Key stakeholders such as Parks Victoria, Towong Shire Council and the Department of Environment, Land Water and Planning all have representatives sitting on the NEBAG committee.

As with smaller private landholders, the recognition that goes with NEBAG and the management plans in place allows the group to remind all key stakeholders to uphold their own responsibilities.

“

We're now able to ring up VicRoads and they know who you are.

- committee member

Having these public land managers on board with Good Neighbour funding is also critical in ensuring that private landholders can't use it as an excuse for inaction on their own properties. This, in turn, helps promote a more landscape scale approach to the blackberry problem.

“

I think there are people working over boundary fences more ... and I think if you have a few people who have proved it can be done and they start talking about it, it shows others what can be done.

- committee member

The Committee itself is also about regional intelligence and planning. Members of the committee cover most of the area and so provide help in identifying and addressing problems — such as an infestation on a new landholder's property — before they get out of hand. Having government agencies on the committee also gives them an idea of where there are issues and allows them to invest their own limited resources where they might have the most amount of impact.

NEBAG’s impact

NEBAG committee members recognise that they’re never going to ‘solve’ the blackberry problem. However, they cite a range of benefits their efforts have led to over the groups lifetime. Most directly has been the reduction in blackberry in the region:

“
It’s made a difference, no doubt about that ... there’s absolutely no question the blackberry problem is less. In this valley, it’s better than it was 10 years ago by a mile. Some of the roads had canes growing out onto them they hadn’t been touched for that long – now they’re gone.
- committee member

“
Without the group up here, the hills would be covered in blackberry.
- NEBAG project officer

Having done a range of mapping work in the region, the project officer estimated that there had been an 80% reduction in blackberry cover at many of the properties the group had worked with. As noted by one committee member and landholder:

“
When I first bought my place I had to get the chainsaw out to cut a path through – there were blackberry plants as big as this building. I couldn’t drive cattle through some places because of blackberry and you can’t grow anything under it. You just grow to hate them after a while.
- committee member

While as much as 10% of their land had been covered at one stage, they are now essentially blackberry free, with that land being returned to productive use. Similar stories were noted for landholders across the region. These improvements have also meant increases in land value, particularly where large areas of land had been ‘locked up’ by blackberry thickets.

Challenges

While the impacts of NEBAG appear to be substantial, the group has faced a range of challenges and barriers:

- The scale of the problem in the region — both in terms of the extent of infestations as well as the length of border with public land.
- Sourcing funding for the project officer to engage and liaise with landholders. While the approach of using an officer was seen to be valuable, it meant the group had to carefully seek funding and identify economies of scale with other programs in the region.
- Dealing with landholders who were reluctant to take action. While these landholders were occasionally referred on for compliance action under the Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994, this was often seen to be ‘beating them over the head with a feather’. Compliance action was most often observed to work when it was combined with some form of social pressure.

“
Where it has worked is where he’s seen all the farmers around him do a good job, and they’re all looking over the fence and saying ‘how about you do yours’. And that’s put a bit of pressure on him.
- committee member

Factors for success

Committee members put NEBAG’s success down to a range of factors, including:

- Having a champion to act as a central contact point and to drive the group forward.
- Involving and gaining the commitment of key stakeholders in the region, including various government agencies and large private land managers.
- Having a skilled and dedicated project officer.
- Being centred on providing the community with the support it needs to deal with the blackberry issue.

“
Because it’s community driven, people are more accepting of someone like me driving in the front gate ... because if I’m from the department or I’m from the CMA, or wherever, they’re not going to be receptive to that.
- NEBAG project officer



CASE STUDY 03
NORTHERN YARRA BLACKBERRY ACTION GROUP

The Northern Yarra Blackberry Action Group (NYBAG) works with landholders surrounding Dixons Creek, Steels Creek and Chum Creek in the Yarra Ranges.



Origins of the group

The Northern Yarra Blackberry Action Group (NYBAG) was formed following the Black Saturday bushfires of 2009. As well as devastating communities in the region, these bushfires created a fertile environment in which blackberries thrived. The group has been working since to support and encourage blackberry control among private and public land managers. NYBAG is part of a network of three Landcare groups that work closely, pooling their resources to deliver more effective on ground action.

“In Steels Creek we care just as much about Chum Creek and Dixons Creek ... it doesn’t dilute the effort, it multiplies it out. It’s one of the most wonderful things to me of being involved.

Each Landcare group works within their own communities and as part of the larger network. The NYBAG committee then takes on the role of strategic planning across the catchment. The group has a large spray rig that members have access to, as well as a range of smaller backpack sprayers — resources that individual groups wouldn’t have been able to purchase on their own.

Supporting individuals with advice and assistance

The area has many ‘hobby farms’ and ‘lifestyle blocks’ — 10 and 20 acre properties that may run a few head of cattle or a small vineyard. One of the key approaches that NYBAG uses is focusing on providing the individual advice and support that each landholder needs.

“Some people just needed advice, some people couldn’t afford to do it and others just didn’t know where to start.

For much of their existence, they’ve funded a project officer during the blackberry season to help deliver this:

“Their job was to literally go around, knock on people’s doors, give them the information, come back later and ring them up, have a chat and tell them what was available.

This was noted to be a key element of the group’s success. While talk among neighbours and within the community helped initiate conversations about blackberry, committee members highlighted that the project officer was important in being seen as a trustworthy source of information and in getting landholders to start initiating at least some sort of control program on their land.



As the NYBAG was funded by an Australian Government bush fire recovery program it was able to operate under different guidelines to the usual Partnership Program. For example providing incentive for herbicide.

The project officer and NYBAG provided both advice and small incentive payments to help landholders do this. As part of the process, landholders signed up to voluntary agreements with the group. While this wasn't enforceable NYBAG committee members noted the strong influence this had on people's commitment:

“If you shake someone's hand, or put your name on a piece of paper, it becomes very difficult to walk away from that.

They also noted that, once the process had begun, people became more comfortable with these sorts of agreements and, in turn, began to cooperate with agencies such as Melbourne Water in other aspects of improved land management.

“It flowed on to range of agreements with Melbourne Water to cooperatively manage creek and riparian habitat on their land.

Information to get the ball rolling

NYBAG committee members and project officers offered a range of advice around blackberry control methods and options, including running chemical training days and information sessions. However, one of the key pieces of advice they noted helped was simply giving landholders assurances around what it would take to deal with their blackberry problems.

“It was having someone who can say ‘I reckon you can do that yourself with that equipment’, or ‘if you borrow the big [spray] rig you could do it in a day’ or ‘that'll cost about \$500’.

This included providing assurance about contractors themselves:

“If I'm getting a contractor to do some work that I've never had done before, you don't want to go to someone to get a quote and have a conniption because you go expecting \$500 and it's \$5000. Or, you don't get a quote because you're assuming it's five grand and it'll only actually cost \$500. For me having that advice broke it down into a really manageable level

A gradual process of improvement

Over the life of the group, NYBAG has signed up 183 properties to voluntary blackberry management agreements and supported control works on approximately 4000 hectares of land — around 300 hectares of solid blackberry infestation. But committee members noted that this has been a gradual process.

“It was slow at the start - people just didn't see it as a priority. But once the momentum started, it was like rolling a snowball down a hill ... As different people were able to get control of blackberry on their land, the neighbours started to become much more interested.

This was partly about social pressure:

“If your neighbours on both sides are spraying their blackberries and yours are still green and growing up the fences, you kind of get the guilts. In small communities, you don't want to be known as the person with the blackberry problem.

But it also appears to be about a sense of knowing what is possible:

“Seeing your neighbours do it helps you believe you can ... I had about four acres that I couldn't walk through because the blackberries were so bad. I now have cattle grazing through there and they help keep it open and the blackberry under control. My neighbours on both sides have their blackberry under control. And the neighbour down the valley, who had the worst of all, he's now doing it on his own, he borrows the spray rig and does it himself because he sees it is possible.

In this way, NYBAG has progressively addressed blackberry infestations across Steels Creek, Dixons Creek and, most recently, Chum Creek. In Steels Creek “there's not too much of a blackberry problem now, whereas it was every property that did have one”.





A sense of achievement and normality

One of the key challenges, and benefits, of the work done by NYBAG has related to the devastating bushfires of 2009. While blackberry infestations were simply not a priority for many residents following these fires, subsequent efforts to control blackberry have helped residents connect with others in the community and to recognise that they had returned to a sense of normality.

“

To worry about blackberries – they became a problem that ‘I’ll deal with later’ ... but dealing with it though, was the most satisfying thing. And it made me feel like I was getting back to normal self ... When I go to the back of my property, I still feel such a sense of satisfaction when I go up and I’m looking at clear area now under the trees and the cattle can graze it. That makes me feel normal. That makes me feel back in control of my life; that my life isn’t happening to me. And that’s more than a relief, that’s an empowering thing.

Bringing agencies together

Besides working directly with private landholders, NYBAG has also worked strategically with public authorities in the region to help coordinate blackberry control. This included developing relationships with Melbourne Water, Yarra Ranges Council, Parks Victoria and VicRoads, with committee members helping to facilitate meetings and dialogue between these groups.

A committee member pointed to one example where they helped get Melbourne Water, VicRoads and Parks Victoria to discuss blackberry control on the Melba Highway. In a single meeting they were able to clarify that they shared responsibility for the problem and its solution.

“

They were saying ‘if you look after the traffic control, we’ll spray that bit for you’. And all of a sudden it was one day’s work, not six years of ‘I’ll do my bit and you do yours’ ... bureaucracy went out the window in these meetings.

The relationships formed between NYBAG and these groups has further helped in maintaining what blackberry control has occurred.

“

We can call council and ask them to spray a bit of road that’s come up.

This persistence and level of maintenance is also noted to be critical in the long-run. Committee members estimate that the blackberry problem has been reduced by 80% in Steels Creek, 60% in Dixons Creek and 40% in Chum Creek. Their aim is to have infestations reduced by 90%, allowing for a much lower level of ongoing control. The key need is for land managers to continue with an annual program to maintain and build on the substantial gains already made.

“

We’ve all invested too much time and effort to see it stop now.



CASE STUDY 04
YARRA RANGES LANDHOLDER, ROD

Rod’s property lies along the banks of Dixons Creek in the lush Yarra Ranges.



A self-sustaining lifestyle property

Rod’s property lies along the banks of Dixons Creek in the lush Yarra Ranges. Rod bought the property 20 years ago in a run-down state and, since then, has been involved in a process of ‘incremental improvement’. This process was interrupted when the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires burned through the property and destroyed his house—’it’s been a long process’ he says.

At 116 acres, Rod runs red angus cattle, typically carrying 20-30 and to keep well within the property’s capacity. He can borrow a small amount of land from his neighbours during drier years if need be, but at the moment has a couple of years’ worth of hay stored away. There are also two cottages on the property that get leased out to tourists.

“It’s quite a satisfying existence. I try to be self-sustaining.”

Blackberries and the Northern Yarra Blackberry Action Group

Blackberries had ‘always’ been on Rod’s property, but at levels low enough that they could be cut and mulched as necessary. However, after the 2009 bushfires they started growing out of control. A neighbour described some parts of the property as ‘a sea of blackberry, quite overwhelming’.

Trying for several years to manage them on his own, Rod came to the conclusion he needed help:

“I realised it was a job I could never get on top of, so I decided to go through the blackberry action group.”

Rod had been in contact with the Northern Yarra Blackberry Action Group (NYBAG) through the Dixons Creek Landcare. NYBAG provided Rod with a small grant to which he added his own funds and engaged a contractor to come and make a start on controlling blackberry on his property. This involved spraying large thickets of blackberry with herbicide, as well as spraying blackberry along fences where manual removal was difficult.

“The contractor came out and spent about probably ten days here. But what I noticed was the impact was immediate, within about 3 or 4 days blackberries were dying all over the place.”



Chemicals as a key tool

Part of the work that NYBAG and the contractor did was to help Rod understand the efficacy and safety of chemical methods of controlling blackberry. Prior to this, he had been concerned about herbicides leaving long-term residues in the soil.

“
I’m not a fan of chemicals, never have been. ... but in the end, I thought to get them under control I’d go down that path. And in retrospect it was a good decision ... the blackberry are under control and will be virtually eliminated in the next two years.

The NYBAG project officer assured Rod that it is important to see chemical treatment of blackberry as part of a broader treatment strategy — spraying being an efficient way of treating large infestations over several concurrent years, reducing infestations to levels where they can be dealt with much more easily, including by hand removal. Rod emphasised the importance of this follow up work:

“
The important thing is that after you do it initially, just keep at it ... get those lonely shoots coming up among dead blackberries ... If there’s a small outbreak around this tree, I’ll want to get onto that before it spreads. So it’s not a big task to get blackberries when they’re at that stage, but when they’re six foot high it’s a different kettle of fish.

The rewards of the effort

Rod’s efforts to bring blackberry under control on his property have led to a range of benefits. This includes reclaiming land both for its aesthetics and practical value.

“
I’ve now got very nice, clear land. Whereas previously I just had blackberries six foot high. And parts of the property I couldn’t get to ... all of a sudden I could get to. There are lots of spots on rural land like this that you think ‘gee that would make a nice little picnic spot’ and I’d lost them. But now I’m getting them all back again.

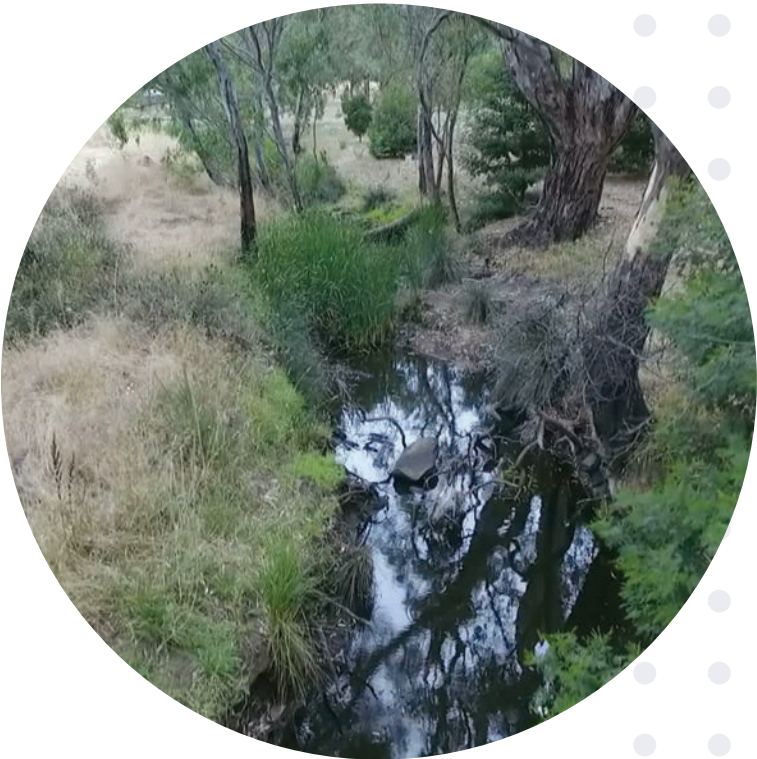
Accessing parts of his property previously covered in blackberry has also let Rod manage his property as he wants. It’s let him clear fallen trees and add more fenced areas into his 23-paddock rotational grazing system. This has reduced the burden on his land, but also freed up more time and resources for what he wants to do. This is, of course, in addition to the sheer sense of accomplishment.

“
It just looks good. There’s a great deal of satisfaction in saying ‘I started here... and now I’m here’.



CASE STUDY 05
BARKERS CREEK BLACKBERRY AND GORSE ACTION GROUP

The Barkers Creek Landcare group has been running for over 20 years. In the late 2000s it took a renewed focus on returning the Barkers Creek back to its historic beauty.



Building on a long-running land management works

“
I got involved in the group when there were only four people involved. And when we started we thought we’ve got to do something about the creek – it’s a bit of an icon – there’s historic stuff that says how beautiful it was. And we were looking at it and it was rubbish. It was a mess – blackberries everywhere. So we started to get involved.
- Daryl Colless, Barkers Creek Blackberry and Gorse Action Group

The creek itself stretches approximately 17 kilometres between North Harcourt and Castlemaine. It runs through over 100, mainly ‘rural lifestyle’ blocks of a few acres each.

“
Up until we started this most of the landholders didn’t care about the creek ... blackberries were a problem, they were all along the creek, but it just wasn’t a priority.

With the support of a range of funding sources, Daryl and the group began crafting a vision for the creek and for how to bring blackberry under control. In 2012, with the support of the Victorian Blackberry Taskforce’s Community Partnership Program, they set up the Barkers Creek Blackberry and Gorse Action Group, which formalised the focus on these weeds along the creek.

“
Part of our approach was to just start talking to people ... we started to go along and visiting people and going ‘well wouldn’t you like to clean it [the creek] up?’ That’s where the taskforce and the blackberry group really came into its own really. Because we were able to say ‘we’ve got a resource, we’ve got some funding, we can actually help you’. And that was the starting point.



Tackling the problem together – a growing mass of community-led action

With the goal of clearing blackberry and gorse from along the Barkers Creek, the group has focused on providing landholders with a range of resources and advice.

“We tried to talk to them about the options that they had ... Because people feel daunted. They look at the blackberry and think it’s too much. So we can say ‘we’ll bring 15 or 20 people and we’ll tackle it together’. And it ends up being those people appreciate that, and they come and help other people.

The group has produced a fact sheet for blackberry control and has found that, in this area, many people simply have a lack of familiarity with blackberry as they’ve moved up from the city.

“They have these blocks and then go ‘well what do we do?’

In addition to advice around control methods and the labour force on offer, the action group has also offered small grants to landholders to help with the costs of professional contractors in cases where infestations were large and difficult to access. This was generally worked out on a 50:50 basis and typically in the order of several hundred dollars.

Each landholder who has received direct support from the group has also entered into either three or five year management plans. The plans cover initial treatment, follow up treatment, fencing and revegetation, with the primary aim of protecting the creek. Fifty-five of these plans were signed during the time of the Victorian Blackberry Taskforce support and feedback was that the plans, overall, were helpful in guiding action. Indeed, Daryl noted:

“Some of the feedback we got was that the information in the action plan was incredibly valuable.

Lastly, the Barkers Creek group also have an affectionately named “B-team” — volunteers with appropriate spraying qualifications that help residents with follow-up spraying.

The support provided through the group has translated into the group itself picking up new members and growing. This has helped it to maintain and improve its momentum over time.

“In the last ten years we’ve pretty much got everyone along the creek involved.



Impacts on blackberry along Barkers Creek ...

The momentum of the group and their work along Barkers Creek has had substantial impacts on blackberry in the area. Much of the stretch of the creek looked after by the Barkers Creek group has been cleared of blackberry, moving them into follow-up mode.

“Now that we’ve got it relatively tidy, part of our action plan is follow-up, follow-up, follow-up ... nobody wants to waste the effort that’s now been put in.

With land cleared and revegetation work happening, residents are also seeing more native species in the area. As one local resident noted:

“We’ve got echidnas around now ...and blue-tongue lizards – I never saw them before. And the kookaburras; heaps of birds. And you look at pictures where the trees are smaller than me and now they’re double my size, you just feel so good. We’re adding to the environment, bringing back the birds and everything... and people love it – they come here and just love it.

... and on group members

There are flow-on benefits for group members too. With little in the way of town infrastructure, the group has become one of the key community meeting events:

“We don’t have a town hall or anything, but we are becoming the community-focused group in the area. There’s a lot of social cohesion that’s coming out of our working bees... people that then go on to relate to each other separate to what we do at our working bees.

There is also the sense of satisfaction derived from the group’s work — something particularly obvious at the size and scale at which the group is currently operating at:

“If the group continues to be a good size and people continue to turn up—20 to 30 people at working bees each month—then people can go home satisfied because you’ve got enough mass of people to get the work done. And at the end of it we have a lovely morning tea and go ‘that’s satisfying’.



Challenges and lessons

While only three or four property owners along the creek aren't involved, Wendy, one of the committee members, notes that the greatest challenge was getting people involved in the first place. To get around this, Daryl noted the importance of face-to-face engagement.

“Letter drops and that sort of thing are okay, but when you sit down and talk to someone, then you've got a better chance of getting them to come on board.”

Wendy emphasised that these people have also really got to know their facts, pointing out the various benefits of blackberry control, such as reducing fire danger, but also not being too pushy, ‘some people just don't want to be involved’. This includes being mindful of the differing capacity of people and working within that.

“People join for their own reasons and we try to keep it simple.”

One aspect of this was avoiding holding regular meetings:

“Instead of having monthly meetings, which wore the previous group out, at the end of our working bees we have a quick update. We use the end of the working bees as a way to give constant feedback.”

In terms of scaling up efforts along the creek, Daryl noted that having the support of a project officer was invaluable.

“There's a limit to how much voluntary time you can put into connecting up with landholders. And of course she was then able to draw up all the agreements — the three and five year agreements for managing the land.”

Some group members had also been averse to using chemicals to control blackberries, even in cases where infestations could not be brought under control cost-effectively any other way. For these members, there was a gradual awareness-raising process around the efficacy and safety of these chemical control methods — and their value in certain circumstances.

Finally, Daryl highlighted the importance of persistence and follow-up control work. He talked about an area where there had been weeding years previously that, because it had been left unmanaged, was now just as bad as it was initially.

“You've got to persevere ... do it once and walk away, then you're going to have the same problem in five years. We've been doing this for multiple years now but, year-by-year, we see it getting better and better.”



CASE STUDY 06
BARKERS CREEK LANDHOLDERS, JUDY AND LOU

Barkers Creek runs between Castlemaine and Harcourt in central Victoria. Along its banks just outside of Castlemaine sits Judy and Lou’s four-and-a-half-acre property.



A ‘Haven on Barkers’

‘Most of it’s garden’, explains Judy, ‘though we do have some goats and a pony’. The couple also run a bed and breakfast from the property, with Barkers Creek itself being a key drawcard. Despite being dry half the year, Judy says that ‘the people that come love Barkers Creek’.

Having moved from Melbourne in 2009, Judy recollects the effort and learning that they’ve done in the intervening years.

“We came from Mount Waverly, where we had beautiful gardens. And we had no idea when we came here ... there was virtually nothing here, nothing. It was just desert.

One of the key hurdles in those early years, however, were dense and extensive infestations of blackberry.

Blackberries and the support of the Barkers Creek Blackberry Action Group

When they first moved to their Barkers Creek property, Judy and Lou faced:

“... blackberries probably 6 foot high and wide as you could see on both sides of the creek ... you couldn’t see the whole lower path, it was just blackberries. It was overwhelming.

The scale of the problem and their lack of experience dealing with blackberry left them with little idea of where to start. However, after contacting the local Barkers Creek Landcare group and the associated Barkers Creek Blackberry Action Group, Judy and Lou were soon provided with the advice and support they needed to start tackling the problem.

“They introduced us to all these ways of being able to manage it.

As well as advice, the group also supported Judy and Lou with a small amount of co-funding to help with the costs of spraying.



“

Landcare organised a gentleman to come out and he did all the spraying ... the property just had a massive amount of blackberry .. and when they died off we were just told to keep looking for little shoots and to poison them, which we've done. Now we're on top of it ... we just do the touch ups.

Together with this continued maintenance is the continued support of the blackberry action group:

“

We did some poisoning of the blackberries last year. ... We can just ring up and get help, ask questions — they're always there for us.

An opening up of space and opportunities

Today, the property is a mix of native and European planting that in no way resembles the blackberry thickets and bare paddocks that previously characterised the land.

“

The blackberries took so much of our land ... when you clear them out you've got all this open land to plant again. And where that was we've done a lot of planting along the creek ... I'm adding to everything with natives ... although I also still like my English-style things too.

“

We often walk around here of a night time like we're in a park. We just see how it's improved since it was barren, because other than blackberry and gorse, it was just a mess — now we walk along and it's like a person's backyard, it's not a paddock.

Clearing out blackberry and reintroducing native species has also helped bring in a diversity of birds and other fauna, such as kangaroos, echidnas and reptiles.

“

Someone who stayed in the bed and breakfast ... he saw 26 different varieties of birds in the time he sat out there and had his breakfast.

Judy notes the advice of the Barkers Creek Landcare group has been important here too, with members suggesting what trees and other plants to put in that are suitable to the local area.

Friendship and social connections

Beyond the benefits for their property and the environment, Judy and Lou have also found community through their interactions with the group and their work on blackberry. The group in this area, Judy explains, is very much about helping each other out.

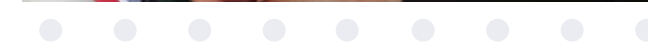
“

Everybody's very conscientious along Barkers Creek and other areas we've been to. Everyone cares and chips in and helps.

The group meets on monthly working bees to help address blackberry and other issues on both private and public land. This includes the regular follow-up work required for keeping blackberry under control. But Judy notes that it goes beyond the work itself:

“

It's hours of work, but we love it. And we've met lovely people ... it's a real friendship thing you do regularly and look forward to ... we enjoy it and it's well worth it to us.





VICTORIAN BLACKBERRY **TASKFORCE**

www.vicblackberrytaskforce.com.au