



# HAWKESBURY RIVER COUNTY COUNCIL

*The Local Control Authority for the management and control of declared noxious weeds in the local government areas of Baulkham Hills, Blacktown, Hawkesbury and Penrith.*

5 December 2013

Weed Management Review  
Natural Resource Commission  
GPO Box 4206  
SYDNEY NSW 2001  
(via Online Portal)

**SCANNED**

**Re: HRCC Submission to NRC Weeds Management Review Issues Paper**

Dear Commissioner,

We would like to thank the Natural Resources Commissions for undertaking this review into weed management within NSW, and the opportunity to comment on the Issues Paper released in October 2013. Our appreciation is also extended to yourself, the other members of the Steering Panel, and NRC and DPI staff for attending Hawkesbury River County Council as part of your field visits to gain a more practical insight into the weed management.

Whilst it was felt that the Issues Paper addressed many relevant issues in relation to weed management in NSW, it has been decided to focus this submission on "4.3 Institutional Arrangements" as they most relate to the practical experience of Hawkesbury River County Council (HRCC) operating within the context of the Sydney Basin.

## **The Major Barrier to Effective Weed Management in the Sydney Basin – Fragmentation of Weed Control Coverage**

The patchiness of weed surveillance, regulation and control is a long standing problem in Sydney. Whilst some of the best examples of weed management can be found within the urban reserves of Sydney Councils, a broad regional strategic program has never been practically implemented. Even with the *Noxious Weeds Act 1993* and its clear sections mandating a basic level of regulation in every local government area, this has not been adopted whole heartedly across the 42 council areas of the Sydney Basin. The result is the continual re-infestation from less engaged areas into adjoining, or worst still, travelling distances (or inter-state) along a web of high risk pathways radiating from the most populous city in the nation.

### ***Evidence of Fragmentation***

The Sydney flower markets are known to be a major biosecurity risk in terms of introduction and spread of new weed species. However, the Council area in which it is located (Strathfield City) lacks the resources to employ an inspector at the markets and is not a recipient of Weeds Action Program funding. Whilst the Council does excellent weed management within

its own reserves (asset management) it is not equipped to engage regionally to assist with the prevention of new incursions into the state. This has been an issue well known for some time and the current models have not been able to fill this obvious early detection role.

### ***Capacity Gaps are the issue, not a faulty model***

Whilst it is easy to blame governance for the inability to provide a basic standard of cover across Sydney, this would lead to an ineffective solution. This issue is much more related to capacity gaps – specific skill sets required to implement regional goals.

From a general purpose council perspective *specialist* weed knowledge is often missing as the organisation grapples with delivery over 300 services in an exposed political environment. This is especially a pattern in the highly urbanised Councils, in which “weeds” would barely register as an issue with the elected body.

From a regional perspective, staff *with* weed knowledge have been given the responsibility, without adequate skills, to plan strategically for an area up to 50 times the size of their own region. For example, Sydney tried to form its own governance system (Sydney Weeds Committees) that allow the management of millions of dollars of public funding. In reality, very few of the weed officers involved had experience at dealing with such tasks before. Whilst the effort, willingness and energy certainly existed, the skills and experience needed were lacking. As a result, large amounts of time were involved in trying to “get the machine moving” rather than “steering the machine”. As such, their presence, whilst valuable in many ways, has not been able to address the fragmentation issue.

A legal structure (incorporated association) has been established to allow the SWC to operate bank accounts, incur expenditure and issue invoices. The SWC has created its own executive structure which operates independently of the policies and procedures of its member organisations. While the SWC must meet certain financial reporting obligations to the Department of Fair Trading, this is minimal when compared to the procurement and reporting standards which apply to State and local government organisations. The collection of annual membership fees and existence as an incorporated association is unnecessary for the SWC to perform its role as a regional weeds advisory committee.

### ***Some Recommendations***

1. *WAP Lead Agency* – DPI to set clear guidelines for a basic standard of governance for lead agencies that can be easily and objectively measured throughout the life of the project. These should meet the same standard as any other organisation responsible for the expense of public funding.
2. *Provision of Training* – Allow weed officers/advisory committee members to take courses in the following areas and charge it against the WAP grant and increase funding accordingly. Governance, Strategic Planning, Chair and Meeting Operations.
3. *Expanding Local government via shared services to fill delivery gaps* – The current County Council model could be expanded both spatially (to match LLS boundaries)

and in services, to also include pest animals. The most obvious outcome is that patchiness would be immediately resolved (spatially) and a basic standard of weed management provided. This approach would also do a lot to reduce the current “capacity gaps” by leveraging concentrated workforce skilling that can take place within a County Council, and spreading this benefit more widely. This would enhance resource sharing principles as explained by *Dollery et al.* whilst also extending capacity building. The key advantage of this model is its ability to work within the existing funding framework whilst providing increased employment (and results) on-ground.

See **Appendix 1** for more detail on how the Biosecurity County Council model may function.

### **Benefits of the County Council Model**

Since the inception of County Council legislation into the Local Government Act, County Councils have been successfully used as a governance model for weed management. The regional, cross border structure lends itself a natural fit for landscape scale weed management. As such County Councils have been in operation for weed management for over 60 years in NSW. Today they include 34 Local Control Authorities and cover 148,742km<sup>2</sup> or 18% of NSW.

County Council planning and reporting will link much more strongly into a broader regional, state and national level strategic policy in relation to invasive species than any other organisational model available. (See **Appendix 2**) However, the major benefit of a County Council is an ability to implement strategy broadly over a landscape using a nil tenure approach. As an independent statutory body, it has the ability to regulate private land owners and take direct control on Council public land. It remains a statutory organisation accountable to elected officials of the area in which it serves and its governance costs are capped externally by the NSW Remuneration Tribunal. Transparency is provided by the standard set by the Division of Local Government for the whole sector.

The examples which lead to negative County Council experiences are much more related to internal management issues than a problem with the governance model. An expanded and larger role for County Councils will only serve make vigilance of them more likely. The modern IPR system will also expose performance issues much more readily.

#### *Evidence of Strategic County Council Implementation*

The evidence of this can be displayed by comparing the delivery of the NSW Invasive Species Plan goals from and perspective of Hawkesbury River County Council, and comparing that to a Sydney-wide delivery under the NSW Weeds Action Program.

In Figure 1, it can be seen that whilst most expenditure is directed to “Asset Management – 27%” or the control of widespread weeds, there is still a fairly even spread amongst other ISP Goals.

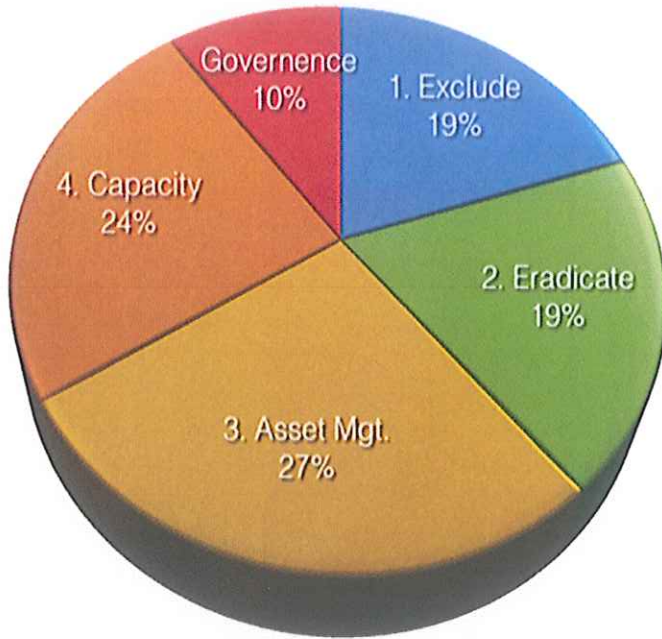


Figure 1: HRCC Expenditure / ISP Goal 2012-13 (See Appendix 3)

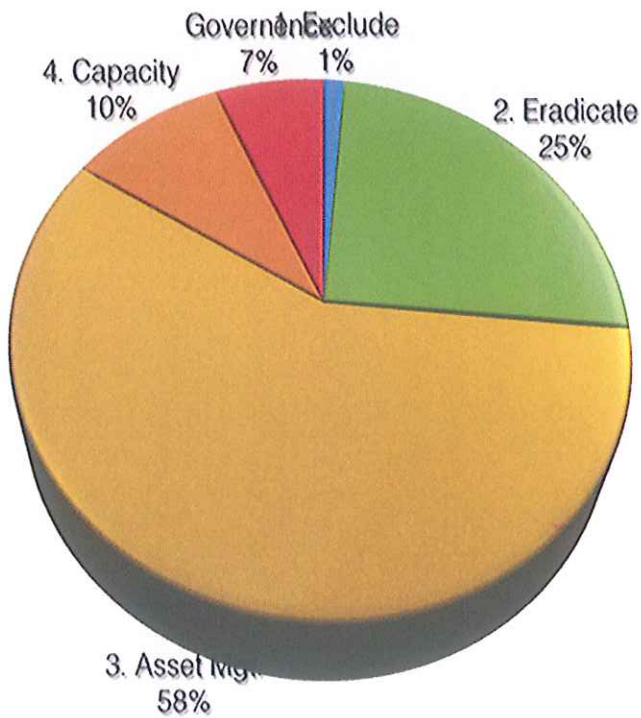


Figure 2: Sydney WAP Expenditure / ISP Goals 2012-13 (See Appendix 3)

In Figure 2, the allocation to asset management increases markedly to 58% when combined with the other 18 partner organisations delivering the WAP outcomes. These are general purpose Councils (16) and NPWS regions (2). The “exclusion” goal – which represents the greatest return on investment in weed management, is reduced to just 1%.

The purpose of this example is to not devalue the importance of widespread weed management; indeed this is an essential role within Sydney region. The purpose is to show return on investment against the ISP is so much greater when delivered via a County Council model. This is because a County Council is not a land manager, but a *landscape* manager.

#### *Other Benefits of County Councils*

The County Council model the leveraging power of economies of scale and resource sharing. This occurs not only in a capital sense, such as the purchase of a \$500K aquatic weed harvesting system that can be utilised in four LGA's rather than one (See Figure 3), but also in human resources.



Figure 3: The HRCC Weedosaurus Weed Harvester – capital ‘economies of scale’ in practice

#### **Weed Officer Traineeships**

An example of this is the workforce skilling is taking place at HRCC. The Hawkesbury River Aquatic Weeds Project is the first long term maintenance program focussed on aquatic weeds within the Hawkesbury Nepean River. 2012/13 was the first year of this partnership between DPI and HRCC as a four year project. It became apparent that the labour market lacked the required skills to employ someone job ready even though our local area of Western Sydney was experiencing high unemployment. HRCC set up an industry partnership with WSI TAFE College to tailor the existing Conservation and Land Management Course to the skills Weed Officers needed to implement the NSW Invasive Species Plan in our region. After receiving over 45 applicants, two were recruited to our Weed Officer Trainee Program fully funded by this grant.

The trainee program runs over a two year period and is similar to an apprenticeship - four days at work, one day at TAFE. They are all officially registered with the Commonwealth and NSW Government State Training Services. HRCC students are fast tracked by Richmond TAFE by receiving all their legally essential training requirements upfront (ie: Chemcert) producing "field ready" staff as quickly as possible. Their workplace training is run by our Operations Manager who tailors their weed control techniques training to specific target species currently in strategic demand. Their on-ground works were all focussed in relation to ISP Goals and achieving measurable and reportable outcomes against the grant project.

The trainees reach productive weed control potential within three months of commencement, and are then encouraged to increase their capacity in broader areas of interest, such a plant identification or mapping and monitoring. Their enthusiasm for their work, their productivity and role models they are setting within the community are all a testament to their success. Whilst this project funded two trainees, HRCC has incorporated this model into its other projects and employed a "Team Leader Position" to specifically supervise them. In January 2014 the County Council will have seven trainees employed.

#### ***Some Recommendations***

4. Concentrate all operational delivery of pest plant and animals into local government.
5. Expand the County Council model across the entire Greater Sydney Local Land Services to achieve greatest return on investment against the NSW Invasive Species Plan.
6. Support enthusiastically traineeship programs within the weed industry to create new jobs and fill capacity gaps at greatly reduced costs.

In conclusion we urge the panel to acknowledge the successes achieved with effective institutional models such as Weed County Council's, NSW Invasive Species Plan and the NSW Weeds Action Program. However be aware that opportunities exist to recommend changes beyond the status quo that will further enhance the value to the community of current effective approaches. We look forward to hearing back from you and considering your draft recommendations.

Yours Faithfully,



Chris Dewhurst

**General Manager**

# Appendix 1

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## Proposed LLS “Biosecurity County Council” Delivery Model for Greater Sydney

Chris Dewhurst, GM, HRCC, 6 December 2013, [gm@hrcc.nsw.gov.au](mailto:gm@hrcc.nsw.gov.au),  
@HawkesburyRCC

The Concept: LLS “State” and LLS “Greater Sydney” remain key planning / strategic / policy development agencies – creating a mix of legislative and incentive frameworks to deliver on their plans at their respective levels.

Under this proposed model, LLS “Local” is local government (as County Councils), who function under an inter-governmental contract (defined via “Vertical Shared Services” Dollery *et al*, 2012) to engage and deliver the services on-the-ground. This could be delivered in Sydney via four “Council Clusters”, similar in jurisdiction to the current Sydney Weeds Committees boundaries (see Fig 4) and established under the *Local Government Act 1993* (S383). The services provided include pest plant and animal control, regulation and education activities.

A council driven LLS delivery model will have the following advantages:

- Ease at which LLS State strategy can be implemented by “single” organisations across a wide variety of landscapes and tenures utilising the Integrated Planning and Reporting framework to plan and deliver.
- Utilising local government “shared services” economies of scale benefits – especially in plant provision, IT and specialist knowledge. (there are excellent examples of Council’s already doing this effectively, ie: WSROC, SWC, HRCC) – further evidence in Dollery *et al* (2012)
- Employing more people (long term) under the Local Government (State) Award (lower cost than state public service) = more people on-the-ground where the community want them (cognitive of current Award arrangements).
- State government employees focus on strategy, policy, support material and legislation.
- Local government employees focus on operational works, community engagement, network development and education.
- The Landcarer and/or Farmer only needs to establish a relationship *with one government agency* - LLS “Local” - for all of their biosecurity and NRM services.

Whilst being employed by local government, this representative will be uniformed and “branded” with the LLS corporate logo.

- Can easily expand to include current Weed Control (LCA) and/or other roles.

In conclusion we believe we have a rare opportunity to coordinate the delivery of biosecurity and NRM roles in a greatly simplified model. A model the community is more likely to understand and therefore engage with and support. It would eliminate duplication (especially in the strategic areas) and foster cost effective use of public funding leading to more operational jobs in the sector. It will produce a bottom line result of engaged land managers, more on-ground results, enhanced biosecurity and a productive and healthier environment.

Ref: Dallery B, Grant B, Kortt M (2012) *Councils in Cooperation – Shared Services and Australian Local Government*. The Federation Press. <http://www.federationpress.com.au/>

Comments gratefully accepted via: [gm@hrcc.nsw.gov.au](mailto:gm@hrcc.nsw.gov.au) or Twitter @HawkesburyRCC

Online version here: <http://hrcc.nsw.gov.au/latest-news/>



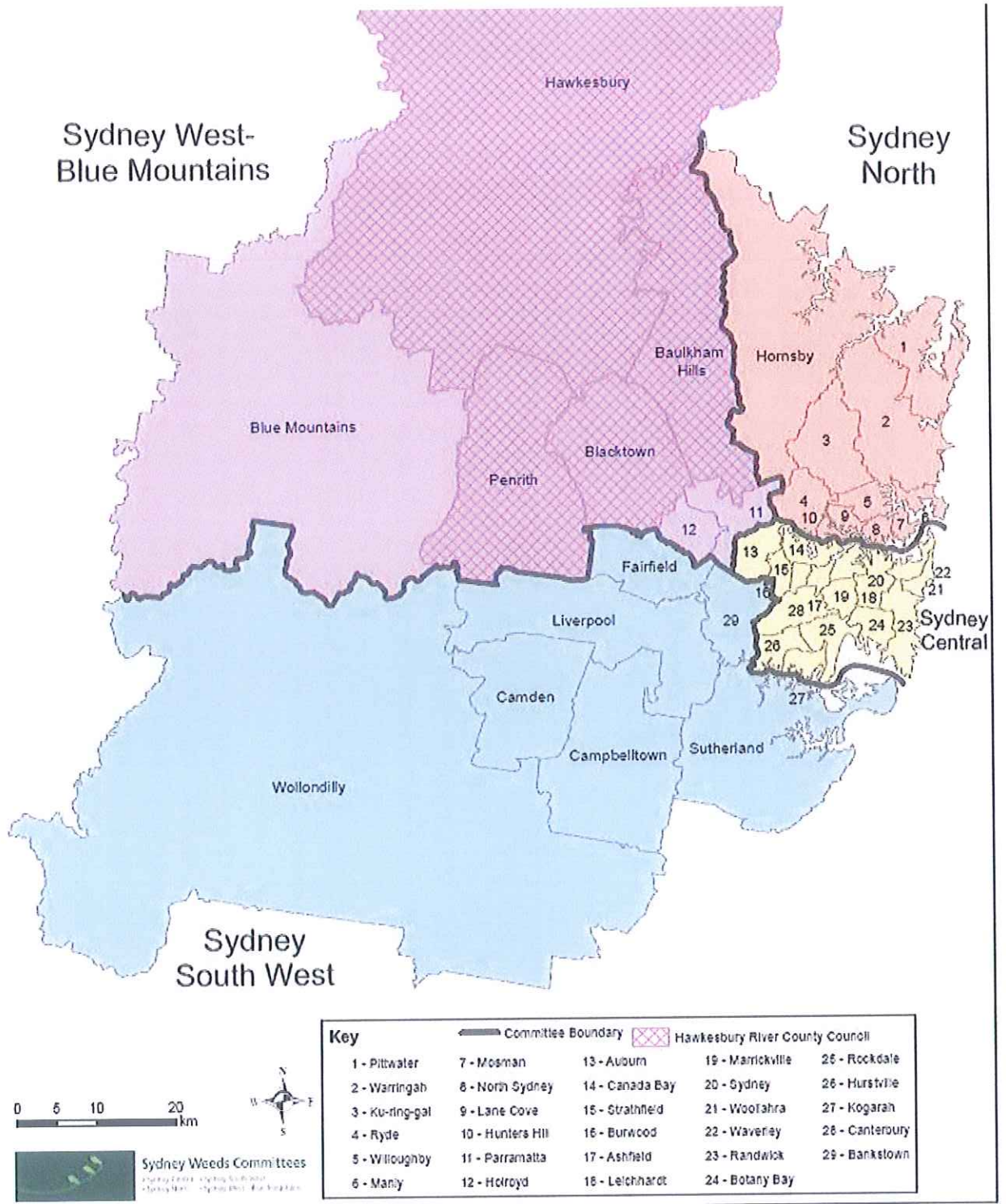
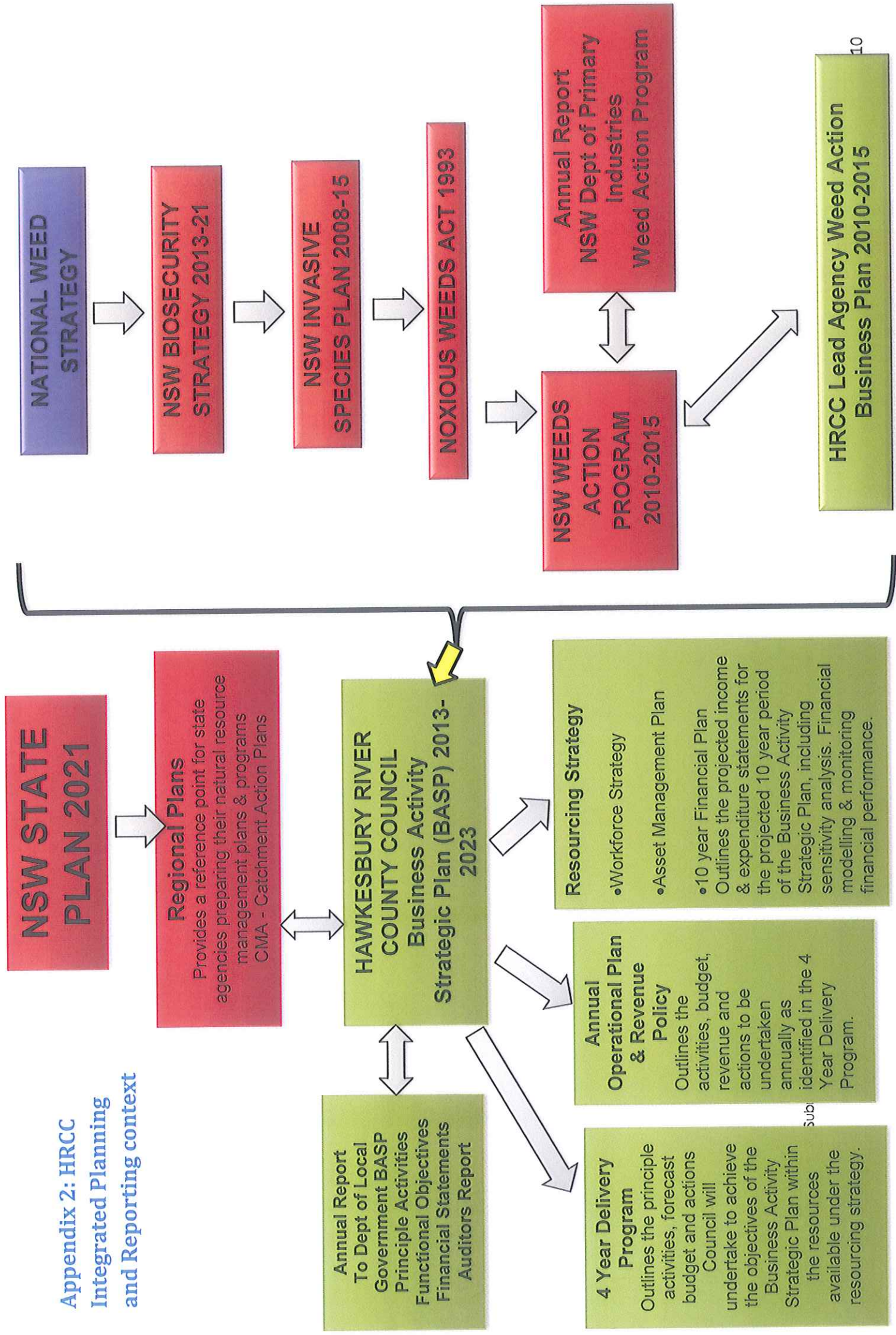


Figure 4: The Current Council Clusters that could form the LLS Biosecurity County Councils based on the Sydney Weeds Committee regions

**Appendix 2: HRCC  
Integrated Planning  
and Reporting context**



# Appendix 3

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## Data Used

Table 1: Data from Figure 1

ISP Goals	1. Exclude Weeds	2. Eradicate Weeds	3. Asset Mgt.	4. Capacity Building	Governance
HRCC Expenditure 2013/14	\$210,417	\$210,417	\$290,360	\$261,803	\$111,800

Table 2: Data from Figure 2

ISP Goals	1. Exclude Weeds	2. Eradicate Weeds	3. Asset Mgt.	4. Capacity Building	Governance
Sydney WAP Expenditure 2012/13	\$11,478	\$224,163	\$524,048	\$87,215	\$61,535

# Appendix 4

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## Abbreviations Used

**DPI** – Department of Primary Industries

**DLG** – Division of Local Government

**HRCC** – Hawkesbury River County Council

**IPR** – Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework

**NRC** – Natural Resource Commission

**LCA** – Local Control Authority

**LGA** – Local Government Area

**SWC** – Sydney Weeds Committees