



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY
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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the ACT environment's Bushfire preparedness

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The key message of this submission is to seek urgent action to manage the spread of African Lovegrass (ALG) on public land in the ACT and in its suburbs.

As you will be aware, recent rain in the ACT has contributed to the rapid spread of weeds including ALG. ALG is in its early stages of establishment in the Inner North. The majority of areas in the Inner North are still free of the weed, however it is spreading extremely rapidly. Acting quickly is critical because each ALG weed contains hundreds of seeds (estimated at 300 – 1000). Early intervention and ongoing management will protect the community from fire and other risks associated with ALG and reduce future management resource requirements.

The Committee is asked to consider the measures set out in this submission to ensure the Government is doing everything it can to contain the spread of ALG *early* – each season ALG spreads further and is more difficult and costly to manage, with significant cost to the Canberra community.

Risks posed by African Lovegrass:

- **Safety risk:** I am concerned the unabated spread of ALG poses a significant fire risk to ACT communities. Lovegrass Fire Demonstration, Bredbo Rural Fire Service refers: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Pa94d-48RI>
- **Environmental risk:** ALG is invasive and forms a monoculture which competes with native grasses and flora with flow-on effects to fauna populations.
- **Social risk:** ALG is a tall grass that grows to 1.2m high and its spread will effect social amenity, such as the community's ability to use children parks and green space.
- **Economic risk:** ALG infestations carry a range of economic impacts including ability to hold community events/ economic activity all-year-round, impacts on economic assets and values, and impacts of increases to mowing schedule requirements. ALG is more challenging to mow than shorter and less dense grasses, with some areas requiring to be mowed multiple times to deliver the same result. Increased mowing efforts would result in economic consequences, in addition to the safety, environmental and social consequences set out above.

The scientific name for ALG is *Eragrostis curvula*. The '*ACT Government Advisory List of Naturalised Alien Plants – Species Assessment*' identifies ALG as a "massive" environmental risk, "major" social impact, and an "extreme" invasive ability (**Attachment A**, Row 204, of the Tab titled 'Naturalised List' refers). I respectfully ask:

- the social risk rating of ALG be reviewed to ensure it adequately takes into account the fire risk ALG poses to Canberra communities. A verge overgrown

with ALG would be a major conduit for fire. This may result in ALG requiring an upgrade from 'major' to 'massive' social risk, and

- the economic risk rating of ALG be reviewed to ensure it adequately takes into account the economic costs of ALG which forms a monoculture with the ability to transform ecosystems, with potential impacts to economic assets and values, and farm-level impacts. As mentioned, a tall, dense monoculture of ALG would impact the ability of the ACT Government to hold community events / economic activity on public land. It is already appearing on the median strip of Northbourne Avenue, close to Stage 88 and other areas of National Land. The ability of the ACT Government of keeping the grass low all-year round would be significantly challenged/ impossible by large, unabated ALG infestations.

It is important that on-ground weed management resources be deployed in direct proportion with the level of risk posed to Canberrans by the weeds.

I seek urgent action to stop the spread of ALG in Canberra suburbs.

In New South Wales there are many signed about ALG and the need to contain it's spread. In the ACT it is spreading directly under our noses as though we are asleep at the wheel. The link above to the Bemboka Rural Fire Service explains the risks of an ALG fire, including the 'wouldn't wish it on anybody'.

Measures for consideration

As mentioned, Canberra's Inner North is relatively free of ALG. The Inner North has a lot of native vegetation established in older houses and gardens. These gardens would become increasingly vulnerable to fire if in contact with highly flammable grass verges.

For ALG to be managed effectively it requires stopping the spread from affected to unaffected areas, while concurrently destroying ALG in areas already affected.

I request the ACT government consider the following measures:

1. Expand geographic areas where ALG is managed (there is only currently a policy to keep it out of areas of high environmental value – but there is no policy to address its spread in our suburbs)
2. Ensure ACT Government ALG mowing practices are strategic, smart and timely:
 - a. Mow ALG *before* it goes to seed, and destroy ALG weeds, and
 - b. Ensure mowing does not spread ALG from affected to unaffected areas.
3. Work with volunteers to establish a plan to re-generate median strips where ALG infestations are established.
4. Empower volunteers and the community to work alongside the government to address ALG in community parks, waterbird/ environmental habitats, and greenspace areas:

- a. Equip and train volunteers to effectively undertake ALG management activities in areas where they volunteer their services, and
- b. Educate the community on how to identify ALG, destroy and dispose of ALG (e.g. not putting ALG into green waste bins due to the risk of it being turned into mulch).

Detail

1. Expand geographic areas where ALG is managed

ALG does not discriminate where it grows. All green space including lawns, parks and road curbs are prone to ALG infestation.¹ I request management areas be expanded to where ALG is present. This may include land managed by the ACT Government, the National Capital Authority and areas managed by Defence.

The ACT government's current management objective is one of asset protection of remnant native vegetation and sites of significance such as Namadgi National Park and Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve. This is an important management objective; however it does not go far enough to protect Canberra suburbs and the community from the risks posed by ALG.

ALG must be contained in Canberra's suburbs. The following proposed approach is practical, with longer-term benefits compared with the cost of doing nothing.

I request the ACT Government deploy additional resources dedicated to:

- a) Identifying and destroying ALG weeds in Canberra suburbs, with deployment of on-ground resources with a target of destroying as many ALG weeds as possible by December 2024.
Time is critical because summer months of December, January and February is when ALG seeds are produced and spread most significantly (noting ALG is a perennial weed).
- b) Mow any ALG weeds, which are not destroyed by December 2024, multiple times in December, January, and February to ensure the ALG weeds do not go to seed.

The above activities would need to continue into future years due to the seed bank in the soil. Over time, efforts could be reduced because, as the ALG is consistently managed, the seedbank in the soil would reduce and ALG could be replaced with native grasses.

¹ Noting ALG appears to struggle to establish as effectively in areas of shade.

2. Ensure ACT Government mowing practices are strategic, smart and timely

A strategic, smart, timely and practical approach is the only way to manage ALG effectively. This means working with the seasons by mowing ALG weed *before* it goes to seed. There is no point mowing ALG after it has gone to seed because the seed will already have spread.

Attachment B provides a report titled *Distribution and Abundance of African Lovegrass in the ACT and Capital Region and Options for Strategic Control*, December 2011. The report notes the spread of ALG seeds from mowers appears to be a significant factor in spreading ALG from affected to unaffected areas. Mowing practices appear to have contributed to the spread of ALG on Canberra's key arterial medium strips, including Canberra Avenue, Tuggeranong parkway, Belconnen Way, Limestone Avenue and Macarthur Avenue.

To avoid this in the future, I ask the ACT Government to ensure:

- a) machinery is properly washed down to avoid spreading ALG seeds from affected to unaffected areas, and
- b) mowing contractors remove any visible ALG seeds heads *before* mowing. Although this would take time in the short-term, it will avoid spreading seeds and save resources and money over the longer-term.

3. Work with volunteers to establish a plan to re-generate median strips

ALG is present on the median strips of the Inner North, including Limestone Avenue, Macarthur Avenue, and Belconnen Way. Regenerating these median strips is important because the median strips are a key source of the spread of ALG to nearby lawns and parks.

I ask the ACT Government to:

- a) establish a plan to re-generate median strips where ALG infestations are present e.g. Belconnen Way, Macarthur Avenue and Limestone Avenue. The infestations of ALG on median strips requires re-generation activities to replace ALG with native flora.

4. Empower volunteers and the community to work alongside the ACT Government in efforts to stop the spread of ALG

As you will be aware, volunteer groups play a significant role keeping the ACT parks and greenspaces weed-free and beautiful.

- c. Equip volunteers to effectively undertake ALG management activities in areas they volunteer their services by ensuring they have adequate chem

certifications and advising how to can alert the ACT government to ALG affected areas requiring urgent mowing / destruction of larger areas of weeds, and

- d. Community education on how to identify ALG, destroy and dispose of ALG (e.g. not putting it into green waste bins due to the risk of it being turned into mulch). If necessary, our volunteers could work alongside the additional ACT government resources to help door-knock homes with ALG present on their lawns.

This submission largely focusses on Canberra's Inner North because ALG is in its early stages of infestation and yet to establish. As mentioned, most areas of the Inner North are still free of ALG. This provides a small window of opportunity to act.

Like all Canberran's I am also concerned by the spread of ALG in other areas of the ACT including the Inner South (e.g. the median strip on Canberra Avenue) and Tuggeranong. The sooner similar measures are put in place in these broader areas, the less seed bank will be in the soil and the easier the problem will be to manage in future years.

I do not underestimate the challenge of managing the spread of ALG. I consider the risks of not acting quickly and with urgency carry an unacceptably high risk to Canberrans over the medium to longer term, particularly during high fire-risk seasons. I respectfully seek that the measures set out in this letter be seriously considered by the Committee and implemented.