Bellingen Shire Council - Integrating Roadside Environmental Management with Existing Systems

COUNCIL NAME
Bellingen Shire Council

WEB ADDRESS
www.bellingen.nsw.gov.au

SIZE
1,602 square kilometres

POPULATION
12,688

Overview of the project

Through the Council Roadside Reserves grant program, Bellingen Shire Council has improved their existing roadside environmental practices by promoting the value of roadside vegetation, providing guidance to operational activities, and integrating roadside management into Council systems.

Bellingen Shire is an area rich in biodiversity due to its fertile soils and high rainfall. As a result, many of the Shire's roadsides are densely vegetated and support an array of native flora and fauna. Managing roadsides for safety, while retaining environmental and community values is a complex but necessary task to ensure that operational and community needs and requirements are met, and environmental risks managed.

Council undertook initial roadside assessments of more than 20 per cent of the roadsides within the local government area, providing a starting point for conservation value mapping of roadside environments. A key focus of the project was to identify and control invasive plant species threatening these areas.

Image: Road in Bellingen Shire Council.

How the project was carried out

The key activities undertaken during the project include:

- Assessed 20 per cent of roadsides using the Rapid Assessment Methodology (RAM) and the EcoRoadside App.
- Developed a Roadside Vegetation Management Plan and updated the Operational Plan.
- Identified areas which had not yet been assessed, through the creation of a category to highlight these areas.
- Provide staff with generic advice guidelines to improve their environmental roadside management.
- Delivered consultation and training sessions to a range of council staff.

- Undertook Roadside Toolbox Talks in the field with works crews outlining how to work in high and low conservation value roadside reserves
- Added the RAM form into Councils asset management reporting software, Reflect.
- Developed new machine hygiene protocols to assist with the control and minimisation of invasive plant species.

Outcomes now and in the future

Bellingen Shire's project achieved the following key outcomes:
- Replaced their outdated management plan (dated 1998) with Council's Roadside Environmental Management Plan and Operational Guidelines 2019.
- Added the implementation of roadside actions to Council's Operational Plan, providing a direct link to roadside environmental management actions through Council's Integrated Planning and Reporting framework.
- Integrated the RAM form and conservation value information within Reflect, Councils asset management reporting software, providing a long term link to asset management and conservation value and making this information available to staff while in the field.
- Appropriate officers trained in assessing and prioritising significant environmental roadside areas
- Better management of invasive species in the roadside following the development of a hygiene protocol.

Benefits and lessons learned

The project provided Council with the opportunity to update their processes for managing roadside environments, linking this back through their systems to deliver on-ground changes in practices.

Through the cooperation of Council's Asset Engineer, the Land Use Services Team and Asset Edge (the company leasing Reflect), changes were made to the asset management system to include the RAM form and results of the RAM assessments, highlighting conservation values across the Shire. This integration into the Reflect software will ensure that roadside assessment information is integrated into council systems, ensuring that the way assets are managed and maintained is consistent and also accessible while in the field.

Further mapping of conservation areas is planned and will occur in different stages, rather than after each assessment, to ensure efficiencies are maximised, leading to a shire-wide perspective of conservation values. These assessments contribute to an understanding of the values of roadside reserves and link strongly to the consideration of biosecurity obligations through the identification of invasive species along roadsides. Recent updates to biosecurity obligations were integrated into the project which led to an identified need to develop a new machine hygiene protocol and commit to ongoing toolbox talks which will be carried out by the invasive species officer.

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Council Roadside Reserves Project