

How Can We Organize Ourselves at the County Level to be Effective at Combating Cogongrass?

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The CWMA Model

In the western United States, invasive species control programs are typically managed through stakeholder coalitions called Cooperative Weed Management Areas (CWMAs). A CWMA is defined as “A partnership of federal, state, and local government agencies; tribes; individuals; and various interested groups that manage noxious weeds or invasive plants in a defined area (http://www.weedcenter.org/weed_mgmt_areas/wma_overview.html).

CWMAs

- Occupy a defined geographic area with a common geography, weed problem, community, climate, political boundary, or land use;
- Involve the majority of landowners and natural resource managers in the area;
- Are headed by a steering committee;
- Are committed to cooperation;
- Operate under a comprehensive plan that addresses the management or prevention of one or more noxious weeds or invasive plants. The better programs stress strategic IPM-or SVM-based approaches.

Although there are invasive control programs on most public lands in Florida, there has been little strategic coordination of efforts across property lines before now. The Marion County Invasive Species Management Council (MCISMC) has been welcomed as Florida’s “guinea-pig” CWMA.

MCISMC began in 2006 with a \$12,000 grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation’s Pulling Together Initiative. The county serves as the fiscal manager and a contracted consultant (me) acts as coordinator. The first year grant focus was group organization, cogongrass mapping, and strategic plan development.

The mission of a county level cogongrass program

Your mission will depend on the current extent and projected spread of cogongrass in and around the county. Other factors to consider are politics, key participants and available resources. Two basics to keep in mind:

- The strategy must address the problem, not the plant.
- The result must be ongoing reductions in plant infestations.

Group organization

- Follow the CWMA Cookbook (<http://www.mipn.org/cwma.html>), but not rigidly. Different groups will be ready for different levels of formality at different times.
- Find a leader – or become one.
 - The leader’s situation will dictate many early choices. His/her personality, skills, organizational base, and funding will be important determinants of what you can and cannot do effectively.

- Set up an e-mail contact list.
- Set up a website.
 - This is a critical omission from the CWMA Cookbook, but essential for cost-effective communication!
- Hold an organizational meeting.
 - See the agenda we used in the appendix.

Map cogongrass infestations

- Find a GIS system.
- Get advice from county, state heritage program, and EPPC people as to the best repository for your data. Consider funding, compatibility with partners' databases, the need to map infestations and track contact information for both public and private lands, anticipated need for public interactivity, and future planning and tracking of treatments and monitoring.
- Assemble existing data from invasives surveys, public lands, and ROW managers. Large timber companies may also have digitized maps.
- Digitize existing hardcopy data.
- Train public lands, roads, and utility staff to GPS in points as they encounter them.
- Figure out how to get information from citizens and private landowners into the system.
- Fill in the blanks.
- Improve and link online GIS systems.

Develop and implement strategies

Geographic: MCISMC's geographic strategy for cogongrass control is based on Robin Lewis' "bull's eye" approach to preventing exotic invasion of restoration sites (Randall et al. 1997) and Steven Dewey's "Attack Your Weeds Like a Wildfire" guidelines (Carpenter and Murray 2000). Lewis speaks of treating critical areas vulnerable to invasion as the center of a bull's eye and maintaining concentric control buffers around them. Dewey explains that, in both fighting wildfires and controlling invasives, you must 1) build a fire line; 2) eliminate spot fires; 3) protect critical areas; and 4) control the main outbreak. I have added two concepts to this analogy: 5) prevent blowups; and 6) conduct mop-up operations.

Biological: Our biological strategy is based on understanding that cogongrass rhizomes are long, deep, tough, persistent, and resilient – and that relentlessly killing all of them is the key to control. We use this knowledge within an SVM context: "*Strategic Vegetation Management* is the art of persuading nature to perform desired landscape functions. It is a long term process that implies developing a plan that takes advantage of site conditions, then strategically timing and applying appropriate integrated treatments (mowing, trimming, herbiciding, burning, etc.) so as to exploit the vulnerabilities of problematic species, promote the competitiveness of desired species, and utilize the potential of the full range of onsite, native, and adapted plant species." © Linda Conway Duever 2007

Social: Our ultimate social strategy is based grassroots community involvement. Working in geographic priority zones, we are encouraging community groups to adopt neighborhood cogongrass management areas like they adopt sections of highway for litter cleanup. We are developing outreach programs and website resources provide instructions, information, and problem-solving support. However, before you can begin organizing at that neighborhood level, you have to organize a leadership group at the county level.

This team, from which your steering committee will evolve, must include land management agencies, road departments, power companies, timberland managers and their advisors, and herbicide applicators. In most situations, involving political leaders, media contacts, realtors and developers, range managers, fire departments and wildfire teams, law enforcement, railroads, herbicide vendors, and surface mine operators will also be important. Environmental organizations, environmental consultants, extension agents, wildlife management interests, botanical gardens, and universities can help you as well. (See appendix for list of MCISMC's partners.)

As your program grows, you will want to develop a pool of volunteers. But, there is an art to managing volunteers effectively and it takes time away from other things! Think this through carefully and figure out the most efficient way to recruit, train, and manage people in your situation. The answer will probably be to have one or more of your partner organizations do it. Look for partner organizations that might fit this niche.

Getting law enforcement on board is essential! In Marion County, we have a problem with cogongrass hay being baled and sold as horse bedding, with new infestations developing where the straw-filled manure is later piled or spread. Everyone I have talked to about this has given me some sort of nebulous response as to whose responsibility it is to stop this or whether it is even actually illegal to move cogongrass as hay (theoretically only stems and leaf blades vs. roots or seeds). Those of us at the county level need definitive information as to what federal and state cogongrass regulations are on the books and whose responsibility it is to enforce them. Then we need top-down pressure and dollars to assure that those laws are enforced. *Who is going to make this happen?*

Tom Ankersen of the University of Florida law school's Conservation Clinic has agreed to have his students work with us to figure out what county-level regulations we should propose to our commissioners. I will share those recommendations on our website when they become available.

Don't forget to include community leaders with political power and influence!

Necessary documents

To start off with, you do not need any special documents, so long as you have a non-profit or government partner organization willing to accept and administer grants. However, a strategic plan will be needed as soon as possible.

Hold-harmless agreements for liability protection will be needed once you begin on-the-ground work on private lands. See models at the websites below and get advice from attorneys.

As your program develops, look to the Center for Invasive Plant Management (CIPM) (http://www.weedcenter.org/weed_mgmt_areas/wma_overview.html) and the Midwest Invasive Species Network (MIPN) (<http://www.mipn.org/cwma.html>) for guidance on formal CWMA agreements.

Required agency partnership agreements

Federal and state agencies need to make partnering easy for county-level groups! I will be looking to Jim Miller to develop a boilerplate fill-in-the-blanks USFS - CWMA partnership agreement to facilitate cooperation in counties with national forest lands. *Every state and federal agency with an invasive species problem should have a similar document readily available on a well publicized website!* It will

drain an enormous amount of energy from the grassroots/frontline level if each county coordinator has to wade through the unfamiliar red tape and politics of a dozen or more agencies to get partnerships in place. Make it easy for us to get on with the real work!

Partnership agreements must, of course, be acceptable to agency administrators and attorneys, but they should be kept as flexible as possible. They should facilitate two otherwise usually forbidden things: 1) allow agency staff and resources to be used (in accordance with the CWMA strategic plan) on or off agency property; and 2) permit anybody authorized by the CWMA to treat cogongrass on agency lands. Since every bit of time staff and volunteers put into following special procedures and filling out forms means fewer cogongrass plants killed, the agreements should be written so as to keep inessential requirements to a minimum.

Each agency should pre-authorize every District Ranger or equivalent to sign a CWMA agreement as well as whatever in-house partnership contracts or MOUs are required internally. To the extent possible, mechanisms should be set up so that CWMA agreements can function in lieu of standard partnership agreements.

Publicity strategies

Build publicity and communications around a website! You can always print what is posted there for those who don't have Internet access while the website is reaching the larger audience. See our work-in-progress website at <http://www.mcismc.org/>. This beginning was funded by a \$2,400 grant from Florida Division of Forestry.

Several tips to save time and energy with your publicity and website:

- Minimize duplication of effort. Link your site to <http://www.cogongrass.org/> instead of creating new materials unnecessarily.
- Minimize repeated work by using the same materials over and over – for your website, handouts, slide shows, etc.
- Minimize time answering phone calls. Get your program information and FAQs online BEFORE you get press coverage! Otherwise you will waste your time answering individual questions from reporters and landowners instead of getting the job done.
- Minimize steps/people between program coordinator and web updates.

Use additional creative approaches to reach your target audience. Think about who needs to know what to stop cogongrass in your situation, then put the message that each of those groups needs to hear out where they will be exposed to it. Try flyers at street fairs, posters at farm and garden stores, programs at rural community watch meetings, etc.

Sources of funding

A good place to start a quest for funding is the NFWF Pulling Together Initiative. The PTI program (see link below) funds start-up invasive plant control programs but provides minimal support in regards to improving your program and developing future proposals. On the other hand, the National Forest Foundation's Community Assistance Program, which is another good funding source for groups working around national forests, works with you to improve your proposals and train you in organization development and fundraising skills. I would like to see NFWF similarly coach emerging southeastern CWMA's.

PTI program:

http://www.nfwf.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Browse_All_Programs&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=4791

National Forest Foundation's Community Assistance Program:

http://www.natlforests.org/consp_05_cap.html

It is important to develop your fundraising skills and go after grants.

- Identify "matches".
- Google and websurf invasive plant and weed sites for opportunities.
- Get on lists to receive grant alerts. Contact the private lands people in your regional U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office and state wildlife and forestry agencies.
- Keep files on opportunities.
- Calendar key deadlines.
- Lobby for agency funding.
- Involve landowners and corporations.

MCISMC's Lessons Learned

- **A good website is critical!**
- **Work with the strengths and weaknesses of the people you have.**
- **Strategy, Strategy, Strategy**

Literature Cited

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