

MEDIA RELEASE

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Kitchen tables & roads travelled

Local farmer on short list for rural women's award for fight against Parthenium

Puddy (Nita) Chandler has spent her entire life living on the land. Through home schooling her sons on "Cobbadah", a cattle production enterprise near Injune, supporting husband David, and keeping the property afloat and animals alive through the worst drought on record, Puddy knows first hand about the hardships that women on the land face.

She is passionate about the land and the role good natural resource management plays in the long-term sustainability of rural communities. As a result of this passion and with much of the surrounding region suffering from Parthenium infestations, Puddy and David helped found the local Injune and District Parthenium Action Group (the Action Group) in 1991.

Now, after 15 years of battling against one of the biggest environmental and agricultural risks in central Queensland, Puddy has been recognised for her commitment to her community, making the short list for the RIRDC Rural Woman of the Year Award for Queensland.

Talking about her nomination, Puddy was very modest, focussing on the collective gains the Action Group would receive should she win, rather than the personal reward. "Receiving this award will mean the Action Group can step up our education and knowledge sharing activities with the community," Puddy said. "There is a need for further information and for the experiences of our group to be shared with others. And education will be essential if the region is to combat Parthenium and protect our future," she said.

Local natural resource management organisation, the Queensland Murray-Darling Committee (QMDC) has also seen an increasing need to share information in areas not yet affected by Parthenium. Pam Fisher works for QMDC in Roma, and nominated Puddy for the RIRDC Rural Woman of the Year award.

"Farmers from the Dunkeld and Middle Road regions, south of Mitchell, have been seeking information from the Action Group on measures they will need to adopt to protect their properties from the impending spread of Parthenium down the Maranoa River," she said. "These groups need to feel supported, and have access to good information relevant to their particular region. Puddy and the Action Group can provide that support," said Pam.

With their work in developing biological control agents for the weed, and their willingness to share the knowledge with others, Pam said that Puddy and the Action Group have given more than just locally-relevant scientific information. "Puddy has broken down the barriers caused by fear of Parthenium, not just in the Injune area, but in other parts of the catchment, and indeed the state," she said.

To achieve this, Puddy has spent a lot of time on the road, distributing rust- and insect-infested Parthenium plants to farmers across the Injune and Mitchell area, spreading biological controls for the weed across the district. "By actually getting in the Toyota and driving around, we've been able to meet and talk with other farmers and educate them about Parthenium. It has also meant that we've been able to assure them that there is something we can all do and we really are making headway to contain Parthenium," she said.

Having spent so much time around the kitchen tables of her neighbours, Puddy is a big supporter of communicating to farmers on their own land. "Giving people information in an appropriate manner enables them to achieve their dreams. Communicating with farmers can change attitudes and create solutions, so it's really important to do so in way that they are comfortable with," she said.

She has also been able to involve women by travelling to individual farms, because that is where access to the female partner is more likely to take place. "All women make fantastic communicators – they're always prepared to put up their hands and give it a go," she said. Now, Puddy has hopes to encourage more women to take the lead in educating the district about Parthenium and other natural resource issues.

Winning the award for Queensland will also mean that Puddy can receive additional training in communicating and educating her neighbours. It will also mean the Action Group can republish the highly sought after publication, 'The Road We Have Travelled', and plan a bus trip for landholders in the path of Parthenium spread to learn from landholders further north in Parthenium infected areas.

Puddy's vision for greater ownership and involvement from rural communities for their local natural resource management can already be seen in practice around Injune. The increasing role women are playing in driving this local action, said Puddy, is making all the hard work worthwhile.

"All landholders need to be in charge of their own destiny," she said. "We need to work together to address natural resource issues and the sustainable management of our land, sharing ideas and information with less interference from outside forces who have no vested interest in the land, and no comprehension of exactly what life on the land is all about."

To Puddy, natural resource management must be recognised for what it is – a major contributor to the local economy, and an essential part of the social fabric of the bush.

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