

**MANAGEMENT OF WOODY WEEDS IN
THE AUSTRALIAN RANGELANDS:
A BIOECONOMIC APPROACH**

By

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In dedication to my wife Claire and my two sons Anton and Callum

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ABSTRACT

The encroachment of woody weeds within Australian rangeland systems poses a significant threat to the 12 billion dollar Australian grazing industry. Woody weeds reduce stock carrying capacities, increase mustering effort, impede cattle from accessing waterways, and some species poison livestock.

Graziers are faced with the arduous task of weighing up the costs and benefits of weed management strategies in these vast, remote, heterogeneous landscapes with low economic returns and limited available resources. This is further complicated by the episodic recruitment of woody weeds in response to climate. Moreover, the decision making process is made even more difficult with the complexities of multispecies infestations. This analysis provides important information which can assist weed managers in deciding which strategies to adopt for woody weed infestations.

To date ecological population and economic optimisation models have not been combined to establish integrated weed management (IWM) policies for woody weeds within rangeland grazing systems. The woody-weed decision model presented in this research derives such policies while capturing key ecological processes and maintaining economic robustness.

Understanding the costs and benefits of controlling woody weeds requires knowledge of how these infestations change over time, their impacts on pasture production and their response to management. A single species density-dependent stage projection matrix (SPM) model is developed and applied to *Ziziphus mauritiana* (chinee apple), *Acacia nilotica* (prickly acacia), and *Parkinsonia aculeata* (parkinsonia) in upland and riparian zones. These species were chosen to represent a diversity of life-history parameters and response to weed control. Eigenvalue elasticity analysis is used to identify the life stages that should be targeted to have the greatest effect on these infestations. The single species model is then expanded into a multispecies density-dependent population model to investigate the complex relationships between species, their effect on pasture production, and response to weed control. This analysis highlighted the need for IWM policies when managing multispecies infestations.

Woody weed management policies must also consider the impact climate has on episodic recruitment. The northern rangelands tend to have hot-wet summers and warm-dry winters. The wet season results in the germination of seeds but many of the seedlings will perish in the following dry season. Occasionally, climatic conditions will allow for the establishment of many woody weed cohorts. An episodic recruitment model is established for chinee apple based on the historical rainfalls of Charters Towers in northern Queensland. The model considered both the increased germination and survival rates of woody weed seedlings cohorts in high rainfall years, after which they become drought tolerant. This episodic event driver is later incorporated into an optimisation bioeconomic model.

A bioeconomic optimisation model, based on stochastic dynamic programming (SDP) was developed to derive IWM policies for woody weeds within rangeland grazing systems. The model captures the stochasticity of the system as well as the population dynamics of the plant. The dimensionality of the problem was reduced by aggregating the life stages into three sub-groups: seeds, seedlings and adults, while maintaining the transitions of the population within the full matrix model. The model provides clear weed management thresholds and decision rules. The benefits of combining biocontrol with other control methods are also investigated.

Results of this modelling framework established the optimal weed control decisions and management threshold frontier for various combinations of weed control costs and grazing gross margins. Assuming current weed control costs and efficacies with available grazing gross margins, the control of chinee apple by private landholders within the northern Australian rangelands will not result in net profits. However, this research does provide insight into the degree to which gross margins must increase and weed control costs decrease to warrant control. Moreover, with this information, it is possible for other stakeholders to determine the amount of compensation that would be required by graziers to undertake weed control for environmental reasons. An alternative stance is that graziers may undertake weed control for land stewardship purposes.

CERTIFICATION

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

A large black rectangular redaction box covers the signature area. A dotted line extends from the right side of the box, indicating the location of the signature.

Signature

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	III
ABSTRACT	IV
CERTIFICATION	VI
TABLE OF CONTENTS	VII
LIST OF TABLES	XI
LIST OF FIGURES	XII
1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Study area	4
1.2 Problem statements.....	6
1.3 Thesis aims	7
1.4 Thesis structure.....	8
2 REVIEW – WOODY WEEDS, MODELLING, AND ECONOMIC & ECOLOGICAL PARADIGMS	10
2.1 Defining weeds	10
2.2 Woody weeds in northern Australian rangelands.....	11
2.2.1 Chinee apple	14
2.2.2 Prickly acacia.....	15
2.2.3 Parkinsonia	16
2.3 Treating woody-weed infestations.....	17
2.3.1 Strategic goals of woody-weed management	18
2.3.2 Methods for controlling woody weeds	21
2.4 Modelling principles for woody weeds	29
2.5 Economic analyses of woody-weed control	31
2.5.1 Contrasting cropping and rangeland weed problems.....	32
2.5.2 Economic optimisation techniques	33
2.6 Ecological analyses of woody-weed control	34
2.6.1 Evaluating the state of woody weeds	34
2.6.2 Ecological analysis of woody weed populations	35
2.6.3 Key ecological drivers of woody weeds.....	36
2.7 Aims and summary.....	47

3	MODELLING SINGLE SPECIES WOODY-WEED INFESTATIONS	48
3.1	Methods	49
3.1.1	Introducing density dependence	52
3.1.2	Using Gap theory to estimate plant area.....	53
3.1.3	Population elasticities	54
3.1.4	Measuring damage from woody weeds	57
3.1.5	Setting model parameters for case study weeds	59
3.1.6	Modelling woody-weed control.....	67
3.1.7	Modelling biocontrol of woody weeds	67
3.2	Results	68
3.2.1	Population simulations	68
3.2.2	Relationship between weed damage and density.....	70
3.2.3	Time and variance of life stages	71
3.2.4	Population structure.....	72
3.2.5	Elasticities.....	74
3.2.6	Management of life stages.....	76
3.2.7	Periodic management of woody weeds	77
3.2.8	Determining the potential of biocontrol	79
3.3	Discussion.....	81
3.3.1	Temporal benefits of woody-weed control.....	81
3.3.2	Utilising this modelling framework.....	82
3.3.3	Managing woody-weed infestations	83
3.3.4	Effectiveness of biocontrol on woody weeds	84
3.3.5	Density dependence of woody weeds.....	86
3.4	Summary.....	89
4	MODELLING MULTISPECIES WOODY-WEED INFESTATIONS.....	90
4.1	Methods	94
4.1.1	Density dependence for multispecies infestations.....	97
4.1.2	Damage from multispecies infestations.....	98
4.1.3	Benefits of targeting different life stages.....	98
4.2	Results	99
4.2.1	Elasticities of species and life stages	100
4.2.2	Evaluating elasticities for multispecies infestations	102
4.2.3	Evaluating elasticity analysis for single infestations	107
4.2.4	Proportional benefit analysis	111

4.3	Discussion.....	115
4.4	Summary.....	120
5	CONTINUOUS AND EPISODIC RECRUITMENT OF WOODY WEEDS IN AUSTRALIAN RANGELANDS.....	121
5.1	Dynamics of rangeland systems	122
5.1.1	Introduction of commercial stock.....	123
5.1.2	Rangeland wildfire events	124
5.1.3	Drought events.....	125
5.1.4	Rainfall events	125
5.1.5	Further evidence of episodic events in the rangelands	128
5.2	Reviewing plant recruitment models	129
5.2.1	Watson’s episodic population model.....	129
5.2.2	Liedloff and Cook’s episodic population model	130
5.2.3	Higgins’ episodic population model.....	130
5.2.4	Lawes’ episodic germination and survival model	131
5.2.5	Rainfall events for Charters Towers – northern Australia.....	132
5.2.6	Evaluating Lawes’ Rules of woody recruitment	132
5.3	Methodology of a simple stochastic recruitment model.....	136
5.3.1	Modelling woody-weed recruitment	137
5.3.2	Contrasting model results	138
5.3.3	Modelling episodic recruitment.....	140
5.4	Results from proposed recruitment model.....	142
5.5	An evaluation of modelled results	148
5.6	Summary.....	152
6	DEVELOPMENT OF A METHOD FOR OPTIMISING WOODY-WEED MANAGEMENT	154
6.1	Economic models of weed management	155
6.1.1	Weed growth and control model	156
6.1.2	Optimal control.....	157
6.1.3	Deterministic dynamic programming model.....	160
6.1.4	Stochastic dynamic programming model	163
6.1.5	Curse of dimensionality.....	167
6.1.6	Introducing biological control	169
6.2	Summary.....	171

7	OPTIMISED INTEGRATED WOODY-WEED MANAGEMENT	173
7.1	Calibrating the SDP	176
7.2	Results	178
7.2.1	Applying control rules U^*	178
7.2.2	Probable benefits of the optimisation rule U^*	181
7.2.3	Effects of grazing gross margins	182
7.2.4	Effects of weed-management costs	183
7.2.5	Changes in weed management costs and grazing gross margins.....	185
7.2.6	Biological control	190
7.3	Discussion.....	195
7.3.1	Thresholds	195
7.3.2	Eradication.....	196
7.3.3	Burning.....	196
7.3.4	Biocontrol and IWM.....	197
7.3.5	Modelling scale	198
7.3.6	Weed-free grazing gross-margins.....	199
7.4	Summary.....	202
8	CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS.....	203
8.1	Research findings	203
8.2	Contribution of this research	211
8.3	Research limitations and opportunities.....	216
8.4	Concluding comments	220
	REFERENCES	222
	APPENDICES	243
	Appendix 1: Calculations of Lawes' Rules.....	243
	Appendix 2: The algorithm for the SDP model	244
	Appendix 3: Risk and weed management decisions	247
	Appendix 4: IWM with low biocontrol efficacy	250

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2-1: Common northern Australian rangeland woody weeds	12
Table 3-1: Definition of model variables and parameters	50
Table 3-2: Chinee apple demographic parameters	62
Table 3-3: Chinee apple stage projection elements for riparian and upland zones of new (H_0) and steady-state infestations (H_∞)	62
Table 3-4: Prickly acacia demographic parameters.....	64
Table 3-5: Prickly acacia stage projection elements for riparian and upland zones of new (H_0) and steady-state infestations (H_∞)	64
Table 3-6: Parkinsonia demographic parameters	66
Table 3-7: Parkinsonia stage projection elements for riparian and upland zones of new (H_0) and steady-state infestations (H_∞).....	66
Table 4-1: Definition of model variables and parameters	93
Table 7-1: Weed control options (u) and costs \$ ha ⁻¹ (C_u) (Zull and Marshall, <i>unpubl.</i> data 2008). ..	177
Table 7-2: The efficacies of different chinee apple management options in upland zones (Zull and Marshall, <i>unpubl.</i> data 2008).....	177

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1-1: The Australian rangelands are divided into northern and southern rangeland systems based on rainfall events. Credit: (Bastin G & the ACRIS management Committee, 2008; Aust.Gov, 2002; Suppiah, 1992). 5

Figure 1-2: Flow chart of the thesis structure – linking the chapters with the research objectives. 8

Figure 2-1: A schematic representation of different control strategies. Fluctuations are due to climatic conditions. Option 1: No control — (ignore the infestation), Option 2: mechanical control – – – (rapidly decreasing damage but returns to the old steady-state), Option 3: biocontrol — (decreases to a new steady-state), and Option 4: IWM of mechanical and biocontrol – – – (rapidly decreases to new steady-state). Credit: (Norris *et al.*, 2003; Briese, 2000). 28

Figure 2-2: Illustrating the need to consider both the number and size of woody weeds per unit area, when evaluating population density, for; density-dependence, control evaluation, and production damage. Green areas represent tree canopies and the dotted lines are the area used by individual plants to attain nature resources, such as water, nutrients, and sunlight. Plot (a) has a younger woody weed population where $n = 14$, plot (b) is an older population with larger weedy weeds and $n = 7$ 38

Figure 3-1: Life cycle diagram with the corresponding stage-classified population projection matrix (SPM) and population vector (adapted from Brault & Caswell, 1993). 51

Figure 3-2: The rectangular hyperbola model for the relationship between weed density-damage (after Cousens, 1985a). 58

Figure 3-3: Temporal simulations of weed density (x) and damage (D) without any control for (a) chinee apple, (b) prickly acacia, and (c) parkinsonia infestations, in both riparian and upland zones. Note different scales in horizontal axes for chinee apple to enhance readability. 69

Figure 3-4: The relationship between weed density (x) and weed damage (D) for chinee apple, prickly acacia, and parkinsonia infestations, in (a) riparian and (b) upland zones. 70

Figure 3-5: Estimated mean (bars) and standard deviation (lines) of the time spent in each life stage for (a) chinee apple, (b) prickly acacia, and (c) parkinsonia infestations, in (1) riparian and (2) upland zones. 71

Figure 3-6: Estimated number of individual weeds ha^{-1} in juvenile and adult stages of steady-state infestations of (a) chinee apple, (b) prickly acacia, and (c) parkinsonia, in riparian and upland zones. 73

Figure 3-7: Estimated elasticities of the different life stages in new and steady-state infestations of (a) chinee apple, (b) prickly acacia, and (c) parkinsonia, in (1) riparian and (2) upland zones. Growth rate (λ) values are only given for new infestation, as steady-state infestations by definition have λ values of 1.0. 75

Figure 3-8: Estimated changes to the proportion of grazing loss for a once-off management of different life stages. Simulations start from a steady-state (starting at 100 years) infestation of chinee apple in a riparian zone. (a) represents the removal of non-adult stages, (b) represents the removal of the adult stages; note scale difference in graphs. 77

Figure 3-9: Temporal simulations of changes in pasture production with the removal of all chinee apple adults (riparian zone), once only, every 10 years, and every 3 years. 78

Figure 3-10: Changes in growth rate (λ) and weed damage (D) in the final year of the simulation of managing steady-state populations with respect to proportional reduction of fecundity over a 100 year period, (a) chinee apple, (b) prickly acacia, and (c) parkinsonia, in (1) riparian and (2) upland zones. 80

Figure 4-1: The objectives of managing multispecies infestations in rangeland systems. 91

Figure 4-2: Multispecies stage-classified population projection matrix (SPM) (H_t) and population column vector (c_t). The sub-matrices and population vectors for each species are H_{kt} and X_{kt} , respectively. H_t allows for competition between species but the zero elements between the sub-matrices prevent individuals becoming another species, which is clearly impossible..... 96

Figure 4-3: Temporal simulations of chinee apple, prickly acacia, and parkinsonia multispecies infestations in (a) riparian and (b) upland zones. Area occupied indicates the density crowdedness species contributes to the infestation over time. Total damage is the proportional reduction in pasture production due to the infestation over time. 99

Figure 4-4: The column elasticities (c_i) of the life stages of chinee apple, prickly acacia, and parkinsonia in (a) riparian and (b) upland zones with five year time steps. Column elasticities represent the amount each life cycle stage from each species contributes to the multispecies infestation. The adult life stages include fecundity. Life stages include new-seed (NS), seedbank (SB), small juveniles (J_1), medium juveniles (J_2), large juveniles (J_3), largest juveniles (J_4), small adults (A_1), medium adults (A_2), large adults (A_3), and largest adults (A_4). The life stages with the largest elasticities should be targeted first for the greatest impact on the infestation. 101

Figure 4-5: The effects of a single control event on population structure and area occupied of a multispecies infestation in riparian zones. Weed control is applied in years 20, 100, and 250, by removing all the adults from (a) all species, (b) chinee apple, (c) prickly acacia, and (d) parkinsonia in riparian zones. 103

Figure 4-6: The effects of a single control event on weed damage (D) in riparian zones. Weed control is applied in years 20, 100, and 250, by removing all the adults from (a) all species, (b) chinee apple, (c) prickly acacia, and (d) parkinsonia in riparian zones. The density of the targeted weed is also presented..... 104

Figure 4-7: The effects of a single control event on population structure and area occupied of a multispecies infestation in upland zones. Weed control is applied in years 20, 100, and 250, by removing all the adults from (a) all species, (b) chinee apple, (c) prickly acacia, and (d) parkinsonia in riparian zones. 105

Figure 4-8: The effects of a single control event on weed damage (D) in upland zones. Weed control is applied in years 20, 100, and 250, by removing all the adults from (a) all species, (b) chinee apple, (c) prickly acacia, and (d) parkinsonia in riparian zones. The density of the targeted weed is also presented..... 106

Figure 4-9: Illustrating the benefits (B_i) of a single control, removing all individuals within each life stage. Simulation starts from a riparian steady-state chinee apple infestation. The benefit of controlling each life stage includes the magnitudinal decrease in damage and the longevity of the effect..... 108

Figure 4-10: Total benefit (B_i) (reduced damages) over time from a single control event, removing all individuals within each life stage. The results are based on a steady-state chinee apple infestation in a riparian zone. The proportional benefit (β_i) of each life stage is given within the bars. 109

Figure 4-11: Comparing the proportional benefit (β_i) from managing the different life cycle stages to the elasticities (c_i) of the different life cycle stages of steady-state infestations of (a) chinee apple, (b) prickly acacia, and (c) parkinsonia, in (1) riparian and (2) upland zones..... 111

Figure 4-12: The proportional benefit (β_i) from targeting different life stages of chinee apple, prickly acacia, and parkinsonia in (a) riparian and (b) upland zones (with five-year sampling increments). Column values are the amount that each life cycle stage of each species contributes to the damage of multispecies infestations. The adult life stages include fecundity. Life stages include new-seed (NS), seedbank (SB), small juveniles (J_1), medium juveniles (J_2), large juveniles (J_3), largest juveniles (J_4), small adults (A_1), medium adults (A_2), large adults (A_3), and largest adults (A_4). 113

Figure 4-13: The proportional benefit (β_L) from targeting different main life stages of chinee apple, prickly acacia, and parkinsonia in riparian and upland zones (with five-year sampling increments).

Column values are the amount that each life cycle stage of each species contributes to the damage of multispecies infestations. The adult life stages include fecundity. Main life-stages are seeds (<i>S</i>), juveniles (<i>J</i>), and adults (<i>A</i>).....	114
Figure 5-1. Monthly (—) and average monthly rainfall (—) recorded in Charters Towers between 1889 and 2007, extracted from the SILO Data Drill database (BoM, 2008).....	132
Figure 5-2. Probability of Lawes' Rules for the germination and survival of parkinsonia occurring in Charters Towers; solid line indicates monthly rainfall (—), based on rainfall and evaporation data from 1885 to 2007 (BoM, 2008).	134
Figure 5-3. The number of months per year that Lawes' Rules are satisfied for the germination and survival of parkinsonia in Charters Towers, based on rainfall and evaporation data from 1885 to 2007 (BoM, 2008). The dashed line indicates that the average number of months per year that Lawes' Rules are satisfied.....	134
Figure 5-4. Frequency per year of Lawes' Rule for the germination and survival of parkinsonia occurring per year, compared with annual rainfall in Charters Towers, based on rainfall and evaporation data from 1885 to 2007 (BoM, 2008).	135
Figure 5-5. Results of applying both the episodic recruitment model and Lawes' Rules based on Charters Towers rainfall and evaporation data from 1885 to 2007 (BoM, 2008).	139
Figure 5-6. Histogram of frequencies of recruitment magnitudes and the cumulative percentage curve, based on Charters Towers rainfall and evaporation data from 1885 to 2007 (BoM, 2008).	140
Figure 5-7: Episodic (—) and deterministic (—) population simulations of new (lower initial damages) and steady-state (higher initial damages) infestations of chinee apple, prickly acacia and parkinsonia in riparian and upland zones. All simulations are based on the same randomly selected rainfall events from the Charters Towers district. The magnitude of episodic recruitment events used for the simulations is given in the lower chart. To compare the effects of episodic events, the recruitment event in year 57 (○), is the same as the 1974 rainfall (recruitment) event, the resulting growth pulse for the different infestations is indicated by (◇).	143
Figure 5-8: Relationship between the number of initial seeds and the damage incurred 50 years later (●) for chinee apple, prickly acacia, and parkinsonia in riparian and upland zones in the Charters Towers district from randomly selected recruitment events. The 10 and 90 percentiles are given as (—) and deterministic recruitment as (—).	146
Figure 5-9. Probabilities of weed establishment for given initial quantities of seeds of chinee apple, prickly acacia, and parkinsonia in riparian and upland areas. Data based on the given criteria and randomly selected rainfall data from the Charters Towers district.....	147
Figure 6-1: An illustration of how an infestation of woody weeds may change over time. Although the initial states α_1 and β_1 have similar damages, their growth rates to α_2 and β_2 are significantly different due to different initial population structures.....	159
Figure 6-2: Algorithm for dynamic programming (DP).....	162
Figure 6-3: Programming algorithm to generate a transition probability matrix (TPM), and reward vector.	165
Figure 6-4: Programming algorithm for stochastic dynamic programming (SDP).....	166
Figure 7-1: Optimal weed control decisions u^* with respect to changes in damages to production from juvenile ($D\{J\}$) and adult ($D\{A\}$) plants, seed state set at $190,000 \text{ ha}^{-1}$	179
Figure 7-2: A 200-year stochastic simulation of chinee apple in upland zones using optimal control decision U^* as compared to ignoring the infestation. Population started from steady-state population, and climatic conditions were randomly selected. Simulation is based on normal control costs (C_u) and weed free grazing gross margins $\pi_{wf} = \$80$, (a) damage over time from both using U^* and ignoring the	

infestation, (b) the types of control implemented over time under U^* , and (c) discounted cumulative profits from controlled and ignored infestations. 180

Figure 7-3: Cumulative distribution function of net benefits of U^* for controlling a chinee apple infestation in upland zones, based on normal C_u and $\pi_{wf} = \$80$ 181

Figure 7-4: Expected damages, $NPVs$, and net benefits of U^* using normal control costs (C_u), with respect to changes in weed free grazing gross margins π_{wf} . (a) Range of optimal weed damage from U^* , (b) optimal weed damage from juvenile and adult plants, and seed quantities, (c) comparing expected $NPVs$ from U^* and ignoring the infestation, and (d) range of net benefit of U^* 183

Figure 7-5: Expected damages, $NPVs$, and net benefit of U^* for weed free grazing gross margins of $\pi_{wf} = \$50$, with respect to reductions in weed control costs (C_u). (a) optimal weed damage with U^* , (b) optimal weed damage from juveniles and adults, and seed quantity, (c) comparing expected NPV from U^* with the NPV of ignoring infestation, and (d) net benefits of U^* 184

Figure 7-6: Expected pasture production from using U^* with respect to changing weed control costs (C_u) and weed free grazing gross margins (π_{wf}). The maximum damage to pasture production (45 %) is from combinations of high C_u and low π_{wf} , resulting in the infestation being ignored. Eradication is not sought even for combinations of low C_u and high π_{wf} , with the optimal level of weed damage to pasture production of around five per cent. 185

Figure 7-7: Expected total NPV from grazing with U^* and ignoring the invasion, with respect to changing C_u and π_{wf} . The combinations of higher C_u and lower π_{wf} result in the same expected total NPV using U^* or ignoring the infestation. 186

Figure 7-8: Expected net benefits of U^* with respect to changing C_u and π_{wf} 187

Figure 7-9: Expected NPV of the corrected U^* , (constraining $NPV \geq 0$), with respect to given weed control costs (C_u) and weed free grazing gross margins (π_{wf}). 189

Figure 7-10: Management threshold based on net benefits of U^* with respect to weed control costs (C_u) and weed free grazing gross margins (π_{wf}). The bold dark line (zero value) represents the threshold frontier of weed management intervention. Below and to the left of this frontier it is optimal to ignore the infestation. 189

Figure 7-11: A 200-year stochastic simulation of a chinee apple infestation in an upland zone, population started from steady-state, climatic conditions were randomly selected. Simulations are based on normal control costs (C_u), weed free grazing gross margins $\pi_{wf} = \$80$, a biocontrol efficacy of 0.8 and a biocontrol setup cost of $\$10 \text{ ha}^{-1}$. Results are for (a) damage over time from each management strategy; (b) the controls implemented over time for U_{bio}^* ; (c) the controls implemented over time for U^* ; and (d) discounted cumulative returns from each management strategy. 191

Figure 7-12: Probability distributions of four different weed management strategies. Results are based on normal control costs (C_u), weed-free grazing gross-margins of $\pi_{wf} = 80$, and a hypothetical biocontrol agent with an efficacy of 0.8 (with no initial setup costs). The distribution was generated from 5000 stochastic iterations of 200-year simulations of chinee apple in an upland zone. The initial population started from steady-state. 192

Figure 7-13: Expected (median) total net benefits of four different management strategies. Results are based on normal control costs (C_u), weed-free grazing gross-margins of $\pi_{wf} = 80$, and a hypothetical biocontrol agent (without initial setup costs). The expected $NPVs$ are generated from 5000 stochastic iterations of 200-year simulations of chinee apple in an upland zone. The initial population started from steady-state. 193

Figure 7-14: Expected net benefit (median) benefits of U_{bio}^* for given combinations of initial biocontrol setup costs and biocontrol efficacies. Results are based on normal control costs (C_u), weed-free grazing gross-margins of $\pi_{wf} = 80$, and a hypothetical biocontrol agent. 194

Figure 1: Formulae used in a spreadsheet for Lawes' Rules of woody weed seedling recruitment and survival using historical rainfall and evaporative data from the Charters Towers region between 1889 and 2007 (BoM, 2008) 243

Figure 2: Programming algorithm for a reduced state transition probability matrix (TPM) for long-lived woody-weed management. 244

Figure 3: Programming algorithm of a reduced stochastic dynamic programming (SDP) for long-lived woody weeds 246

Figure 4: Effects of stochastic weed distribution on pasture production..... 248

Figure 5: Net gains (J) for treating different level of weed density (W), where uncertainty of future weed densities lie between W_1 and W_3 , with an equal probability of being either density, taken from (Auld & Tisdell, 1987). 249

Figure 6: A simulation of IWM strategy that includes a seed-eating biocontrol agent with an efficacy of 10%. 250