



Biosecurity engagement: Involving volunteers in biosecurity programs

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This information sheet will guide individuals and organisations considering using volunteers to help control pests, weeds and diseases. It discusses matters to consider when establishing a volunteer group and ways to recruit and retain volunteers.

Contributions volunteers can make

All volunteers will bring different experiences and abilities to your program; they can usefully:

- **Monitor pests and diseases**—as monitors, volunteers can actively watch for particular pests, weeds or diseases and can help check pest traps.
- **Promote the aims of the biosecurity program**—as ambassadors, volunteers can discuss the aims of a biosecurity program with particular people or groups through, for example, door-to-door campaigns or staffing booths.
- **Conduct field work**—volunteers can help remove weeds and host plants for pests and diseases.
- **Provide administrative assistance**—volunteers can help with many office-based tasks, such as keeping records, doing bookkeeping, answering telephones, and liaising with stakeholders.

Attracting and recruiting volunteers

People from many different walks of life may be interested in becoming volunteers:

- **School or youth groups** can learn about pest issues.
- **Students or newly qualified people** can gain hands-on experience in areas in which they have been educated but as yet have no work experience.
- **Families** are often keen, as volunteering can teach children about their community responsibilities and, in the context of biosecurity programs, their role in caring for the natural world.

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- **Retirees** often participate in community projects and have the time and skills to participate in various roles.
- **Community groups** with related interest, such as gardening or bushwalking clubs, may enjoy volunteering to learn more and develop skills.
- **Existing networks** such as Landcare and catchment management groups might be interested in broadening the scope of their work.

Use a wide range of **methods to attract people to your group**. Methods could include:

- advertising in local newspapers and on local radio programs
- visiting potential source groups, such as gardening clubs and other community groups
- providing information and/or giving talks at public events, such as field days, agricultural shows and community group meetings
- enlisting an enthusiastic champion for the cause
- running an information afternoon or evening to supply information about planned activities and potential roles for volunteers.

Tailor messages to attract volunteers to different target groups by emphasising what they could gain from it. For example, when communicating with environmental groups, emphasise the environmental benefits from their potential involvement.

When communicating with students, highlight the opportunity to gain work experience.

An information afternoon or evening could also be useful opportunities in which to survey attendees about:

- their willingness to volunteer
- what tasks/roles they might be interested in
- what might motivate them to become a volunteer
- what might prevent them from becoming a volunteer
- how much time they could spend on volunteer activities.

Offer various options, including a range of tasks in which they could be involved and various levels of time commitment; for example, offer one, two or three-hour tasks per week. And if possible, offer opportunities for volunteers to trial potential roles.

To attract more volunteers, encourage already active volunteers to **invite friends and family** to participate, or involve an enthusiastic ambassador or champion for the cause. Understand people's motives for volunteering and, as much as possible, offer opportunities to satisfy them.

Running a volunteer network

Do not underestimate the time and effort needed to run a volunteer network. Research suggests it is preferable to pay the **coordinator** of a volunteer network. Payment will motivate a capable person to continue in the role and not terminate in favour of a paid job.

As well as effective organisational skills, the coordinator should have **strong interpersonal skills** to manage a team of volunteers and should have enough technical skill to be able to understand data volunteers collect.

Ensure good **two-way information flow** about what the program coordinators hope to achieve and about what volunteers are prepared and able to do.

Consider how to **maintain the quality of volunteer work**. Volunteer evaluations can be used to assess volunteers' motivations and interests, as well as their work contributions.

Developing strong associations with government organisations and industry bodies can bring many benefits, such as expertise, insurance coverage, venues for events, and networks with external experts. Find out what organisations are working on the same or similar issues and investigate whether they have any resources you could use or grants you could apply for. Sponsoring organisations might be able to help with incentives, rewards and equipment for volunteers.

Uphold the credibility of the program by ensuring volunteers are well-equipped for the tasks at hand and by maintaining accountability, commitment, responsiveness and transparency.

Ensure the volunteer program **complies with relevant legislation** in your state or territory, such as privacy responsibilities and any relevant equal opportunity and anti-discrimination legislation.

Organisations using volunteers have a **duty of care** to volunteers, including legal obligations under occupational health and safety (OH&S) legislation. They must ensure their insurance covers both employees and volunteers for any work-related injury, illness or death. It may be necessary to purchase separate cover for volunteers.

There might also be a need for other insurances such as public liability insurance and motor vehicle comprehensive insurance.

Ensuring volunteers are equipped for their tasks

Make it easy for volunteers to be involved.

To appropriately match volunteers' **skills and interests** with tasks, use volunteer profile sheets to collect such information and maintain a record of each volunteer's skills, experience and interests for future reference.

Identify volunteers' needs for **capacity building and support**. For example, when volunteers staff information booths, make sure they know enough about your organisation and its goals by discussing key points with them and providing appropriate reading material; and give them details of someone to contact if they are asked a question they cannot answer.

Make sure all **materials** are user-friendly and easy to understand. It is important to have materials such as:

- an induction kit that outlines your group's role and objectives
- policies and procedures for volunteer participation
- reference instructions, checklists and identification materials (such as field guides, posters, weather-resistant glovebox or pocket guides) to use in the field.

Make sure all **equipment** volunteers need to use is appropriate and well maintained.

To ensure results are of a high standard, make sure your volunteers have the **appropriate skill levels** to safely and correctly operate equipment and collect data. The most effective way to ensure appropriate skill levels is to provide hands-on demonstrations and practice. Provide sensitive feedback to volunteers on the quality/standard of their work.

Clearly identify the person or people volunteers can approach with **questions, complaints or concerns**. Make sure the process is clearly articulated in your induction kit and/or procedures documents.

Conduct a risk assessment of potential occupational health and safety issues and decide how they should be managed. Identify any need for direct support to enable volunteers to play their role, such as covering petrol costs or supplying protective clothes or specialised equipment.

It is important that people who act as **ambassadors or champions** for the cause are people who have earned credibility and trust in the eyes of a group or community. They also need to have a good understanding of the program's objectives and its progress.

Keeping volunteers motivated

Provide **benefits** for people to be involved. For example, in a project trial, volunteers were able to bring in pests from their gardens to show experts and seek advice. The program coordinator organised regular meetings that included relevant speakers.

Maintaining enthusiasm to keep volunteers actively involved. Understand volunteers' **motivations** for joining and staying in your organisation and be aware that these can change. Make sure you support volunteers' motivations. Periodically monitor volunteer motivations and allow volunteers to provide an evaluation of their experiences.

For example, in the above project trial, people's motivation to join a monitoring network was because it offered the opportunity to learn from experts how to manage backyard pests.

After seven months, volunteers reported their motivations had changed somewhat; they were by then also motivated by being able to see how their efforts contributed to growers' reduced use of chemicals to manage backyard pests.

Recognise volunteers' efforts in an appropriate way, such as:

- annual awards or certificates of achievement
- discount vouchers from supporting local businesses and sponsors (if possible)
- 'good news' stories and press releases about the group's activities and achievements
- references for students or newly qualified people.

Show volunteers what their efforts have achieved. For example, provide project progress updates at meetings or display posters (showing progress through graphs or charts) in staff rooms. Keep volunteers informed through newsletters, email updates or websites. Articles in local newspapers and other general publications can be a powerful way to create community awareness about the volunteer network's achievements.

Keep volunteers informed of any program changes. Ideally, actively seek their input if changes are considered to the volunteer program and ensure they remain informed as the changes occur. Also bring to their attention any significant changes to the broader pest control or eradication program, including the way the operational side of the program functions. For example, if the pest monitoring regime changes from monthly backyard checks to annual replacement of hanging baits, everyone involved needs to know.

Seriously consider all **volunteer suggestions** about ways to help address pest problems or improve the network function.

Social interaction often becomes a motivating factor as volunteers get to know each other. Organised social events can encourage volunteers and develop a sense of common purpose (food and interesting speakers can be powerful drawcards). As well, try not to change social routines or groups when modifying work plans or projects.



Identify ways to **ease the burden** on volunteers by, for example, ensuring volunteers' activities match their expectations and abilities and by recruiting new people to share the workload. A logbook of activity can be a useful tool to achieve this. Burnout can be a major issue among volunteers.

Useful links

Volunteering Australia is a non-profit organisation with extensive experience in developing and managing volunteer groups. Its website features a range of resources, from providing information about recruiting different sectors of the community to undertaking volunteer evaluations, following OH&S procedures and dealing with grievances: see www.volunteeringaustralia.org/html/s01_home/home.asp.

The Conservation Volunteers website provides information on engaging and retaining volunteers on conservation issues. Many of the principles are relevant across a broad range of volunteer groups: see www.conservationvolunteers.com.au.

The Australian Association of Bush Regenerators has been developing and managing weed-related volunteer groups since the mid-1980s. Its website provides resources on establishing and maintaining volunteer groups in a variety of contexts: see www.aabr.org.au.



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