

Not In *Anyone's* Backyard: Cogongrass

Stephen Pecot, Communications Director, Alabama Cogongrass Control Center

Invasives wreak havoc on Alabama's lands and waterways every year, and the problem is getting worse. Apple snails, kudzu, fire ants, zebra mussels, and hundreds of other invasive species can be found on properties that we foresters manage. In many cases, we've learned to "get by" with them. Strangely, some have become part of our southern heritage and even become jelly for our sandwiches. Of the invasive species found in Alabama, most wind their way through our landscape, affecting relatively small portions of the ecosystem. Some, however, have such an intense impact on the region that it affects our everyday business.

Cogongrass [*Imperata cylindrica* (L.) Beauv.] is the prime example of this type of invasive. For those in north Alabama, you may not have heard of or dealt with this highly invasive pest. Ask a forester in south Alabama about cogongrass and you'll likely hear some stories that you won't soon forget. It is a very real and expensive problem that takes its toll on every type of site where it establishes itself.

Cogongrass was accidentally introduced from Japan through Grand Bay, AL in 1912. Similar to kudzu, it was used in erosion and forage studies in the 1920's. It provided little to no wildlife value because of its finely serrated leaves and high silica content. It stayed primarily in south Alabama and Mississippi during the first half of the twentieth century. It began to spread aggressively as the interstate and highway system came of age and as farming and logging technology evolved. Today it is documented in nearly half of Alabama's counties.

Found in at least 9 states across the US and in 73 countries on every continent except Antarctica, cogongrass is a pest on over 1.2 billion acres worldwide. It is listed in the top 10 of the world's worst weeds. With its biological desert, cogongrass has decimated entire agricultural areas in western Africa and Asia. The danger is that cogongrass, left unchecked, will spread to *every* state and require intensive economic input to control and eradicate.

Cogongrass spreads through its seed in the spring but also belowground through a vast, dense mat of rhizomes. The rhizome network that extends slightly beyond the circular growth pattern is so thick that native plants cannot acquire enough water and nutrients to compete with it. Seeds caught in vehicle grills, rhizomes caught in tire treads and a vehicle's belly, and even fragments spread through mowing and road construction are some examples of how cogongrass spreads. In Alabama cogongrass is found on xeric sandhills, within standing and flowing water, and almost everything in between. Because of its ease of spread through its rhizomes and white, dandelion-like seeds, it is certainly in many more corners of the state.

Fire liability is a substantial risk in areas infested with cogongrass. A cogongrass fire burns 400 degrees hotter than any native plant, including those found in the longleaf pine ecosystem. Cogongrass (even the fresh, green leaves) ignites within seconds, burns at an extremely fast rate, and its flames can extend many times above the height of the leaves. Put another way, cogongrass can kill a mature longleaf pine forest through fire alone.

Currently the best way to control cogongrass is through a judicious use of the herbicides glyphosate and imazapyr. These are the only herbicides on the market known to adequately control it. Repeated tilling is sometimes used in new infestations. And unlike many plants, multiple herbicide treatments are required due to the dense belowground mat. Considering one stem could make as many as 300 new plants, one can see why the danger of exponential spread across our entire region is a very real threat.

Now that I have your attention, you will be pleased to know that the state is doing something about it. A 3-year, \$6.28 million grant was funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (otherwise known as the "Stimulus Bill"). Through the leadership of the Alabama Forestry Commission and the Alabama Cogongrass State Task Force, Larson & McGowin, Inc. was selected as the project coordinator in September 2009. Larson & McGowin, a forestry-consulting firm with headquarters in Mobile, AL, created the Alabama Cogongrass Control Center (ACCC) to administer the statewide program.

The ACCC is going to use several strategies in an attempt to control, mitigate, and even eradicate cogongrass on private, non-industrial lands. With input from a consortium of cogongrass experts across the state, we have devised a series of 6 programs. These include: eradication of cogongrass in Alabama north of US Highway 80 (Phenix City-Montgomery) and north of US Highway 82 (Montgomery-Tuscaloosa); control and mitigation along high-threat routes south of it; a band of protection along the state's borders and Highway 80/82; assistance for underserved and limited income

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landowners; and protection of G1/G2 species and habitats. While the demarcation line may change through time, our intention is to create a cogongrass-free zone in northern Alabama and along the state's borders to lower the probability of the weed spreading to other properties and states. In south Alabama, where cogongrass infestations are as common as pine plantations, we will enroll as many landowners as funding allows and treat up to a maximum acreage per landowner. Project enrollment will begin in spring 2010; treatments will begin during the summer and early fall 2010.

The long-term goal is to create a management system using GIS and spatial tools that will outlive the life of this initial grant. Six million dollars, while a lot of money, will not go far to eradicate this "perfect weed" from our state's landscape. Some estimates of full eradication are 10-15 times that amount. But it is a start.

For more information, contact Ernest Lovett, Project Coordinator, at (334) 240-9348 (elovett@alabamacogongrass.com) or Stephen Pecot, Communications Director, at (251) 438-4581 (specot@alabamacogongrass.com). You can also visit our website (www.alabamacogongrass.com) for the most up-to-date information.

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