

Weeds and Ferals

UPDATE - RED IMPORTED FIRE ANTS

Back in 2001, red imported fire ants were first reported to have reached Australia, having established for perhaps 10 years in Queensland, and a snippet in *Western Wildlife* (WW 5/3) asked readers to watch out for them. Although small, they form huge colonies and, unlike most ants, they don't bite, they sting, raising nasty pustules and, in people who are allergic to them, causing toxic shock and occasionally death. They are considered the world's worst ant pest; stinging people, ruining hay crops, blinding cattle and damaging public electrical devices – including airfield landing lights. They can even kill fish - when the flying reproductives land in water and are eaten by fish, they sting the fish internally, sending it into shock and death.

In Jan 2002 (WW 6/1) we reported that a five-year programme to eliminate the ants had been set in

place, at a projected cost of \$123 million. (Although this sounds a lot, compare it with the State of Texas, for example, which annually spends US\$1.3 billion to try to control this ant.) Peter Davis of DAFWA provided *LFW* with the following update.

"Eight years on, the programme in Queensland continues. Although there has been good control in some areas, new infestations continue to be found, and detection of colonies by remote sensing seems a useful technique. It appears that the ant is mostly transported by vehicles, in garden rubbish, or even through the soil in pot plants. So far, \$210 million has been spent on control, WA contributing a small portion of this as part of the nationwide biosecurity agreement. Primarily a tropical ant, it could be a major threat in the Kimberley and has the potential to establish in Perth, around wetlands especially. So do continue to keep a look out, and report strange ants to DAFWA's Pest and Disease Information Service on 9368 3666 or email info@agric.wa.gov.au".

DOES YOUR BACKPACK TRANSPORT WEED SEEDS?

A recent study in the Northern Territory* has shown that when traveling through areas infested with the serious weed gamba grass (see WW 12/2), people on foot can inadvertently collect lots of seeds, even though this grass's seeds have neither hooks nor sticky bits to attach to clothes. Instead, the seeds fall into open receptacles such as pockets, shoes and especially outside pockets on backpacks (in the reported experiment, these were designed to carry water bottles). So, if you have been walking through weedy sites, check all possible places on your clothes or backpack for unwanted hitch-hikers before moving on.

[* For ref contact Ed.]

ROADSIDE WEEDS - A WORLD-WIDE PROBLEM

This photo shows two increasingly problematic roadside weeds, on the left tambookie (*Hyparrhenia hirta*) and on the right fountain grass (*Pennisetum setaceum*). Both are of great concern to land managers in WA – but this pic was taken in Namaqualand, South Africa! The tambookie is a local, they are not bothered about that one, but the fountain grass comes from East Africa. Imported as an ornamental and for mining rehabilitation, it is spreading like crazy along road- and railsides throughout the Republic of South Africa. Yet another example of the globalisation of environmental pests.



[In 2004, the Cooperative Research Centre for Weed Management produced an excellent leaflet on *Pennisetum* species control. I have a few available in my office – first come, first served! Ed.]