



Victorian Government must ban weedy pasture plant

Conservationists today called on the Victorian Government to stop promoting a weed its own researchers have identified as capable of invading half the state.

The Invasive Species Council and The Wilderness Society warn that future generations will judge the government harshly if it fails to act against Tall Wheat Grass (*Lophopyrum ponticum*), a pasture plant released by the government and promoted for salinity control.

The environment groups have released a report detailing the environmental risks posed by invasive pasture plants being used for salinity control, with Tall Wheat Grass highlighted as one of Victoria's worst emerging weeds.

It reveals outbreaks of the weedy pasture grass across much of the state, including clusters near Geelong, Horsham, Hamilton, Ararat and Warrnambool.

One of the report authors, Dr Carol Booth of the Invasive Species Council, said the impacts of Tall Wheat Grass would be far worse than the salinity problems it is meant to be solving.

"It is ecological madness to allow such a dangerous weed loose in Victorian paddocks, and further sales should be stopped," she said.

"A 2001 report produced by the government recommended that the invasion of Tall Wheat Grass into Victorian saltmarshes be declared a threatening process. And yet the government continued to promote and even subsidise the planting of this highly damaging weed."

The Invasive Species Council welcomes a recent move by the Victorian Government to review the weed risks of Tall Wheat Grass, and urges that it be declared a noxious weed and managed as a high priority threat.

The Wilderness Society's Gavan McFadzean said Tall Wheat Grass is just one of many examples of state governments ill-advisedly promoting weeds for salinity control without having assessed the risk.

"There are a dozen or more weedy plants being promoted for salinity control by governments in southern Australia and research institutes,¹ and more in the pipeline as agronomists breed even harder versions of existing weeds," Mr McFadzean said.

"Australians will be funding the control of Tall Wheat Grass and other weeds being promoted or developed for release long into the future."

Botanist Geoff Carr, one of the report's co-authors, said Tall Wheat Grass is among the toughest plants on the planet.

"It can withstand salinity, frost, drought, alkalinity and waterlogging," he said.

"We have documented that it is spreading from hundreds of sites, and Victorian Government modelling shows it could invade more than 10 million hectares of the state, including 3 million hectares of public land," he said.

"It invades saltmarshes, wetlands, estuaries, coastal cliffs, waterways, grasslands and woodlands, and is a huge danger to numerous threatened species, including the Orange-bellied Parrot and Tussock Grass (*Poa physoclina*), which has only just been discovered and is known from only five sites."

The report points out that weed invasion is a far more serious environmental and agricultural threat than salinity, with just 1-2% of agricultural land affected by salinity, while virtually all of

The Invasive Species Council campaigns for better laws and policies to protect the Australian environment from invasive plants, animals and pathogens.

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Victoria is degraded to some extent by weeds.

“Weeds inflict a far greater cost on both the environment and agriculture than salinity. Nationally, weeds cost \$4 billion a year in lost agricultural production and control, while dryland salinity costs about \$200 million a year,” Dr Booth said.²

“But numerous weeds can be freely released into the environment, without even a risk assessment. This is both economically and environmentally irresponsible.”

Mr McFadzean said many of Australia’s most costly and damaging weeds are plants introduced for pasture under schemes mostly funded by taxpayers.

“The salinity programs suggest that the lessons of the past have not yet been learned. Due to weak laws and policies, serious weeds continue to be introduced and spread.”

Mr Carr, who has written the major reference for environmental weeds in Victoria, said at least two-thirds of Victoria is already mostly covered in non-native vegetation and about 30% of plants in the wild are now exotic.

Calls for reform

The environment groups have called for reforms to stop the use of environmentally unsafe weedy pasture plants for salinity control.

Governments should be performing weed risk assessments of all new introductions, including new breeds of existing weeds, and allowing the introduction only of low-risk species.

They should also ban the sale of serious invaders like tall wheat grass where further cultivation will threaten biodiversity.³

Available for comment

Carol Booth, co-author of the report and Policy Officer with the Invasive Species Council, can be contacted on 0448 868 984, email isc@invasives.org.au.

Geoff Carr, co-author of the report and one of Australia’s leading authorities on environmental weeds, can be contacted on 0417 548 976.

Gavan McFadzean, The Wilderness Society’s Victorian Campaigns Manager, can be contacted on 0414 754 023.

More information

- The report, *Weedy Pasture Plants for Salinity Control: Sowing the Seeds of Destruction*, can be downloaded from the Invasive Species Council website. Just go to www.invasives.org.au, then click on the Publications link.
- A backgrounder on the report is also available for download from the Invasive Species Council website. For photos please contact John Sampson, 03 6227 9547 or email johnsampson@invasives.org.au.

Footnotes

¹ Of 23 species promoted on the Future Farm Industries CRC’s Saltland Genie website, more than half are environmental weeds in Australia.

² In Victoria, the estimated cost of weeds to agriculture is 7-13 times that attributed to salinity.

³ Note the Victorian Government has recently decided to do a new weed risk assessment of Tall Wheat Grass. The Invasive Species Council and The Wilderness Society urge that further sales and cultivation of the grass be stopped.

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