

Feral Herald

Newsletter of the Invasive Species Council, Australia

working to stop further invasions

volume 1 issue 8 December 2004

ISSN 1449-891X

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*Please note the new postal, web
and email addresses.*

Views expressed in this news-
letter are not always those of
the ISC.

ISSN 1449-891X

...special edition...

Australia's quarantine door wide open to new weeds

By Dr. Barry Traill

Australia's borders are wide open to invasion by thousands of new weeds. In previous issues of the Feral Herald we have discussed the appalling loophole in assessing the weed potential of new plants coming into Australia.

We are now calling for your help right now to close our borders to further weed invasions into your bushland, your farm and your garden.

Almost unbelievably, thousands of foreign plants, many of them known to be potential weeds, are allowed into Australia without any assessment of their potential risk as environmental or agricultural weeds.

This biosecurity risk is caused by a loophole in Australia's border controls - Schedule 5 (Permitted Seeds List) of the *Quarantine Proclamation Act 1998*.

The Permitted Seeds List currently includes nearly three thousand genera, or species groups, that have never been assessed for their weed risk because of an historical oversight. Over 4,000 of these species are plants already known to be weeds elsewhere in the world.

These are the potential weeds of the future. Weeds which could be as big a threat as Blackberry, Lantana and Rubber Vine are to our bushlands, farmlands and gardens now.

The responsible Federal Department, Biosecurity Australia, has persistently ducked dealing with this issue effectively. They have refused to close the loophole.

However, we are taking encouragement from the fact that Government Ministers have said they are prepared to act.

Public pressure is urgently needed to encourage the Government to act decisively and close the door on this huge potential weed problem. If you do only one thing for the environment this year please just do this one.

See the next page for action you can take.

Action you can take...

Please send a polite, short but very clear message to the Federal Ministers:

- Warren Truss, Federal Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
- Ian Campbell, Federal Minister for Environment and Heritage

Ask them to immediately plug this massive loophole in quarantine. Ask them to ensure that all plants on the 'Permitted Seed List' must first pass an assessment of their weed potential.

You can send this message via our electronic postcard at www.invasives.org.au/issues.htm Or better still, send a short written letter to both the Ministers.

You can also:

- send this newsletter on to friends and colleagues
- copy and publish this article in your local community group's newsletter

Hon. Warren Truss

Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
w.truss.mp@aph.gov.au
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2601

Senator Ian Campbell

Minister for Environment and Heritage
senator.ian.campbell@aph.gov.au
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2601

If you only do one thing to help stop invasive species this year please do this!

We must plug this massive loophole through which new invasive weeds are entering Australia.

Thank you!

Join the Invasive Action email Network...

Coming out of the recent Invasive Species Forum held in Melbourne, is a new *Invasive Action* email Network.

This is an opportunity to join in regular communication with others interested in invasives campaigning.

See the ISC web site home page for details:
www.invasives.org.au/home.htm

2004 Froggatt Award

Winner of the 2004 ISC Froggatt Award is the community of Inverloch, in southeast Victoria, including the many non-residents who lent their support, for their inspired efforts to eradicate a Northern Pacific Seastar outbreak that had spread from Port Phillip Bay.

For more on this inspiring story, see the web site.

Join the ISC...

Keep informed, and lend your weight to our important campaigning efforts on Invasive Species.

See the membership form at the back of this newsletter.

What's new on the ISC Web Site

- 2004 ISC Froggatt Award
- Report from the Invasive Species Forum
- Join the *Invasive Action* email Network
- ISC Submission to Senate Inquiry on Invasive Species
- All back Issues of *Feral Herald* are available on the Web Site.

Summary: Australia's Front Door Wide Open to New Weeds

Summary of a Report Commissioned by WWF Australia
Summary prepared by WWF Australia

Australia's borders are wide open to invasion by thousands of new weeds. This impending invasion is entirely legal due to a quarantine law loophole left open by Biosecurity Australia.

It is currently legal to import over 4,000 known agricultural and environmental weeds not yet found in Australia, according to a new study, Front Door Wide Open to Weeds.¹

This study was undertaken by the University of Western Australia and the Cooperative Research Centre for Australian Weed Management, and commissioned by WWF Australia. This is a Summary of that report.

Weeds cost agriculture and the environment dearly.

Weeds cost Australia an average of \$4 billion a year and cause large production losses in the beef, wool and wheat industries. This equates to \$1 lost out of every \$7 Australia's farmers earn in exports.

The cost has doubled in just 20 years and is likely to increase.² Weeds have also caused the extinction of at least four native species and continue to endanger many threatened species,³ endangered ecosystems and World Heritage areas.

They are the second biggest threat to Australia's ecosystems and wildlife, and over the next several years are expected to become the number one immediate threat to nature.

The cause of the problem

The source of this biosecurity risk is a loophole in Australia's border controls - Schedule 5 (Permitted Seeds List) of the *Quarantine Proclamation Act 1998*. The Permitted List currently includes over 6,600 entries.

The Permitted List should only include plant species

permitted for import into Australia. However, it currently includes nearly three thousand genera, or species groups, that have never been assessed for their weed risk, because of an historical oversight.

These 2,916 permitted genera include thousands of known weedy plant species. But these plants are not required to undergo any kind of weed risk assessment and can be imported into Australia without impediment.

This substantial weakness undermines both the intent and purpose of the stronger and more scientifically-based border control measures introduced in 1997.

The result of the problem

Front Door Wide Open to Weeds found that the loophole in the permitted list of plants allows the legal importation of:

- * over 125,000 plant species without any form of weed risk assessment, over 4,000 of which are known agricultural and environmental weeds not yet present in Australia.
- * many weeds that are close relatives to Weeds of National Significance (WONS) such as bridal creeper, pond apple and *Hymenachne*.
- * all plants in the same genera (species group) as many other significant Australian weeds, such as grader grass, bellyache bush, arum lily, Scotch broom, pampas grass, kochia, wild radish and annual ryegrass.
- * plants in the same species group where over 50 per cent of their species are known weeds, such as dandelions and thistles.

Examples of what the quarantine law loophole means for rural industries and the environment

- * Pastoralists: All new weeds in the same group as belly-ache bush can be legally imported.

Examples of Weeds on the Permitted List for Importing

Table: List of Weeds of National Significance (WONS) nominees, and the number of their weedy relatives on the Schedule 5 Permitted List that are not yet present in Australia

WONS nominee in a permitted genus	Common name	Number of weedy relatives permitted for importation but not yet present in Australia
<i>Jatropha gossypifolia</i>	Bellyache bush	6
<i>Thunbergia grandiflora</i>	Blue thunbergia	1
<i>Schinus terebinthifolia</i>	Brazilian pepper	1
<i>Genista monspessulana</i>	Broom	4
<i>Sporobolus indicus</i> var. <i>major</i> , <i>S. natalensis</i> & <i>S. pyramidalis</i>	Giant Parramatta grass & Giant rat's tail grass	13
<i>Themeda quadrivalvis</i>	Grader grass	3
<i>Hydrocotyle ranunculoides</i>	Hydrocotyl	16
<i>Hyptis suaveolens</i>	Hyptis	11
<i>Bassia scoparia</i>	Kochia	8
<i>Pennisetum polystachion</i>	Mission grass	10
<i>Cortaderia</i> spp.	Pampas grass	1
<i>Ligustrum lucidum</i> & <i>L. sinense</i>	Privet	1
<i>Cytisus scoparius</i>	Scotch broom	3
<i>Sida</i> spp.	Sida	29
<i>Stachytarpheta</i> spp.	Snake weed	2
<i>Erica lusitanica</i>	Spanish heath	1
<i>Elephantopus mollis</i>	Tobacco weed	1
<i>Reseda luteola</i>	Wild mignonette	7

Serious Agricultural and Environment Weed Species on the Permitted List

The study also profiles 20 serious agricultural and environment weed species not yet present in Australia that would be prohibited from import into Australia if they were subject to a weed risk assessment.

Yet they are able to be legally imported into Australia through the weakness in the Permitted List. These include:

- * Corn brome grass (*Bromus arvensis* L.), a common weed and grain seed contaminant of cereal crops. Also a weed of orchard, fruit and vegetable crops.
- * Portuguese broom (*Cytisus striatus*), a serious environmental weed in California that displaces native plant species and produces toxic seed. The plant also burns easily and is capable of carrying a fire high into the tree canopy.
- * Small geranium (*Geranium pusillum* L.), a common weed in virtually all cropping systems in Europe that has also naturalised in North and South America and New Zealand.
- * Pitted morning glory (*Ipomoea lacunosa* L.), a weed in Japan, United Kingdom, North America and northern Europe whose seed contaminates agricultural produce, especially grain and grain products.
- * Persian ryegrass (*Lolium persicum*), a serious weed of cereal crops in North America and Europe that causes significant yield losses as well as lowering the quality and grade of the grain.
- * Macaranga (*Macaranga mappia*), planted as a garden plant in Hawaii, the weed has spread throughout much of the island's moister habitats forming dense stands that kill off all native plants.
- * Broad leaved meadow grass (*Poa chaixii*), introduced into the United Kingdom as a garden plant and naturalised 50 years later. Seed is still available from nurseries over the internet. It is a widespread agricultural weed throughout Europe.

- * Crop farmers: All new weeds in the same group as wild radish, grader grass and annual ryegrass can be legally imported.
- * Environment: 30 or more known weeds in the same group as knapweeds (*Centaurea*), blackberry (*Rubus*), morning glory (*Ipomoea*) and *Cotoneaster* can be legally imported.
- * Environment: Relatives of broom, privet, and blue thunbergia can be legally imported.

Government policy promise well overdue

The Australian Government committed to fix this problem by 2001 under target 4.1.2 of the *National Objectives and Targets for Biodiversity Conservation, 2001-2005*.⁴

However, over two years after the promised deadline only one of the 2,916 species groups has been removed from the Permitted List.

The delay in fixing this loophole exposes Australian agricultural industries and ecosystems to a significant, unnecessary and unwarranted risk of economic and environmental costs and needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Case Study: Fescue - A New Weed Coming Through the Front Door

An example of a known weed that was recently legally imported into Australia due to this weakness is bear-skin fescue (*Festuca gautieri*); the genus *Festuca* is on the Permitted List and consequently allows the import of all *Festuca* species.

Fixing the problem

Fixing this problem is the cheapest and most straight forward action the Australian Government can take to prevent any new weed problems impacting on our nation.

To close this loophole quickly, cheaply and with minimal disruption to importers, WWF Australia has proposed a 4 point plan to Biosecurity Australia and the Australian Government.

This plan is based on revising the Permitted List combined with changed AQIS procedures, while a long term review by Biosecurity Australia is undertaken.

A four-point solution to close the quarantine law loophole

1. Develop a list of species on the Permitted List that have previously passed a Weed Risk Assessment.
2. Notify stakeholders and the public that:
 - * the Permitted List will be amended on a specified date to remove all genera, and species under official control, and only include species that have previously passed a Weed Risk Assessment.

- * import protocols will be revised on the specified date to so that for species not on the amended Permitted List, importers will be required to identify the plant to species level. AQIS would then validate the scientific name and determine if the species has been previously imported/present in Australia, or not.

- * if the plant species has been previously imported or is known to be widely present in Australia but not under official control the plant becomes a permitted import and is placed on the Permitted List.

- * if the plant species has not been previously imported and/or is not known to be present in Australia, it must undergo a Weed Risk Assessment (WRA) and a decision about its status made. If it passes a WRA it becomes a permitted import; if it fails a WRA it becomes a prohibited import.

3. Implement the above arrangements on the specified date.

4. Biosecurity Australia continue the assessment reviews of previously permitted genera whereby individual species are assessed for eligibility for addition to the Permitted List.

The grass was imported into Australia to be used in rehabilitation works, and is now available for sale. Native to parts of France and Spain, it has low grazing palatability and dominates grasslands in its native range.

It has the potential to reduce pasture holding capacity in agricultural systems and impact on the biodiversity and structure of native grasslands.

The Western Australia Government used a weed risk assessment to determine that this plant is high risk and consequently banned its import into the state.

The modelled potential distribution of *F. gautieri* in Australia spans southern Australia from east of Albany in Western Australia through to just west of Melbourne, including north-east Tasmania.

References

- ¹ Spafford Jacob, H., Randall, R. and Lloyd, S. 2004. *Front Door Wide Open to Weeds: an examination of the known weed species permitted for import without weed risk assessment*. WWF Australia: Sydney.
- ² Sinden, J., Jones, R., Hester, S., Odom, D., Kalisch, C., James, R. and Cachio, O. 2004. *The Economic Impact of Weeds in Australia*. Technical Series No. 8. CRC for Australian Weed Management: Adelaide.
- ³ Leigh, J. H. and Briggs, J.D. 1992. *Threatened Australian Plants: overview and case studies*. Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service: Canberra.
- ⁴ Commonwealth of Australia. 2001. *National Objectives and Targets for Biodiversity Conservation, 2001-2005*. Environment Australia: Canberra.

With thanks to WWF Australia for permission to reproduce this summary

The Full Report...

The *Front Door Wide Open to Weeds* report can be downloaded from the WWF Australia web site at www.wwf.org.au

Past Articles...

Past *Feral Herald* articles on the failure of the national Weed Risk Assessment process include:

- * Volume 1, Issue 3, April 2003 - 'Gaping Holes in the Weed Screen'
- * Volume 1, Issue 4, July 2003 - 'Weed Risk Assessment Update'

These articles are also published on the web site at www.invasives.org.au/issues.htm

Copies of past newsletters can be downloaded at www.invasives.org.au/news.htm

Glossary

Weed Risk Assessment (WRA)

Weed Risk Assessment (WRA), is a process introduced by the Federal Government in 1997, for assessing the weed risk posed by new plants. WRA is a series of 49 questions asked of any new plant proposed for import. Questions include is it toxic? is it aquatic? is it a grass?

Weeds of National Significance (WONS)

A central component of the 1997 *National Weeds Strategy* is the identification of Weeds of National Significance and the resultant coordinated actions across all States and Territories.

Genera

Plural of genus. A group of related species of plants.

Invasive Species Council Membership application form

ABN 27101522829

Name _____

Address _____

_____ Postcode _____

Phone (h) _____ (w) _____

email _____

Work or voluntary position(s) (if relevant) _____

Affiliations _____

Membership rates:

(all prices are GST inclusive)

- | | |
|--|------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Regular | \$22 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Concession | \$11 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Group/Institution | \$55 |

I would also like to make a donation ¹ _____
(does not include GST)

Total: \$ _____

Is this a new membership or a renewal?

* Donations of \$2.00 or more are tax deductible.

¹ Representing a donation to the Invasive Species Council Fund - the Invasive Species Council Fund is a public fund listed on the Register Of Environmental Organisations under item 6.1.1 of subsection 30-55(1) of the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997.

Thank you for joining us. Please send this form and a cheque to:

Invasive Species Council
PO Box 571 Collins St West, Vic. 8007.

Cheques and Money Orders should be made out to the 'Invasive Species Council Inc'.
Sorry we do not have credit card facilities at this stage.

The Invasive Species Council

Invasive species are a growing problem all over the world, and Australia, an isolated island state with a unique fauna and flora, is especially vulnerable. Over the years incredible harm has been done by such pests as foxes, rabbits, toads, carp, prickly pear, blackberries, rubber vine and the tree-killing disease phytophthora. At last count, Australia had 2,700 weed species and more than 200 marine invaders.

Even though the impacts are immense and ongoing, invasive species aren't being tackled seriously. An alarming number of invasive species are still coming in, staying, and spreading in Australia.

The Invasive Species Council is a new, independent, non-government organisation set up to campaign and advocate to stop further invasions, and to contain invading species already present. If you care about the threat posed to Australia by exotic invaders, please join the ISC. We believe we are the first group in the world created *solely* to lobby against invasive species of all kinds.

We want stronger laws on invasives, tighter quarantine controls, regular monitoring of harbours for marine invaders, and Rapid Response Teams to eliminate new invaders. Join us to help make these a reality.

campaigning

raising awareness

convincing our governments to act