

News Article
May 27, 2008
Roger Vines
County Extension Coordinator

An Invasion Worse Than Fire Ants?

The red imported fire ant is an example of a non-native pest that was introduced to the South years ago and has become a widespread problem that will not soon go away. But this article is not about fire ants. I want to share some information about a new plant pest that could be even worse called Cogongrass. Also known as Japan Grass, this non-native plant was introduced into Alabama back in 1911. Now we might be inclined to think if it has been here since 1911, can it really be that bad? The answer is yes. Like many non-native plants, once introduced they go through a lag period and then begin to explode. We are in the explosion stage now. It has been “conservatively” estimated that this grass now covers 500,000 to one million acres across southern Alabama, Mississippi and Florida.

What makes this grass such a pest is the fact that it crowds out our native grasses and plants and can become a sea of just Cogongrass. To make matters worse it has a very coarse texture with a rough margin that can cut the tongue of grazing animals and so it is useless as a forage for cattle or wildlife. It also is tolerant of fire and in fact burns hotter than most other grasses which can kill other plants and even trees in process. It spreads by underground rhizomes and also by seeds. Just one seed head can produce over 3000 seeds. The seeds have fluffy hairs and so are easily spread by wind and on equipment. The Department of Transportation is always on the look out for this grass since it is often spread up and down our interstate highways on mowing equipment.

The grass can be recognized by several unique characteristics. First is the color which tends to be a pale or yellowish green, almost never a lush green color. As it matures it often turns a reddish color hence the name Japanese bloodgrass (which has been sold as an ornamental). The grass also blooms in early spring, much earlier than our other native grasses. Upon close examination of a blade of grass you will notice that the midrib of the grass blade is off center and the edge has a rough serrated feel. This is not a nice grass. It will not grow in full shade but does tolerate partial shade quite well such as under thinned pine trees.

Cogongrass has been found as far north as Winston County and Cleburne Counties, however most of the infested areas are in the bottom half of the state. In some areas of southwest Alabama and Florida, it is so widespread that control efforts are futile or too cost prohibitive. And closer to home, it has been found in Coosa County although only in small patches thank goodness and to our knowledge all these patches have been treated with a herbicide. But it would be helpful if everyone remained vigilant and would report any suspected new patches.

Dozens of herbicides have been tested to control this grass pest and only two have been shown to have a significant effect. Products containing glyphosate such as (Roundup, Glypro, Accord) work fairly well and also products with imazapyr as the active ingredient (Arsenal and Chopper). The concentrate Roundup (41% active ingredient) should be mixed as a 2 percent solution for treating small areas or 3-4 quarts per acre. Roundup has no soil activity and so native grasses can be planted after the Cogongrass is controlled which usually takes two or more treatments. Arsenal on the other hand does have a residual soil activity and so many other plants and ornamentals will be injured if planted within 24 months of treatment.

We will probably always have fire ants but if we can keep Cogongrass out of our county, we will have done a good deed for the environment and for our farm lands. The Coosa Extension Office has a

publication with more information and along with color photos to help in the identification of this pest. If you suspect you have found a Cogongrass site, please let us know.