



THE BATTLE ON OUR DOORSTEP: COGONGRASS

By Stephen Pecot, Communications Director, Alabama Cogongrass Control Center

With all the coverage of cogongrass in recent issues of *Alabama's TREASURED Forests*, readers will be excited to know that a multi-year project has begun to tackle the very serious economic and ecological threats of cogongrass on private lands in Alabama. Through the leadership of the Alabama Forestry Commission and the Alabama Cogongrass Task Force, \$6.2 million of funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA, otherwise known as the "Stimulus Plan") was secured in the summer of 2009. Larson & McGowin, Inc., a full-featured forestry-consulting firm with headquarters in Mobile, Alabama, was chosen to coordinate the state's efforts. Larson & McGowin created the Alabama Cogongrass Control Center (ACCC) to administer the program. In this article, I will give an overview of the problem, the project's goals, and sources of more information.

First, a little background is in order. Cogongrass [*Imperata cylindrica* (L.) Beauv.] is a perennial grass originating from Asia. It was first introduced into the US through Mobile in the early 1900s as packing material for oranges. The leaves are typically 2-4 feet in length but can be shorter, are about 1 inch wide, and have sharp edges with a whitish midrib that is slightly off-center. After a frost, the leaves brown up but stay erect, unlike most other grasses. The root system is extensive, growing as a dense mat of underground stems called rhizomes. Cogongrass usually grows from a small circular patch to many acres in size and can merge into large infestations. It can grow in open areas and even persist in the shade. It is easily confused with other grasses, but all these characteristics taken as a whole can be used to determine if it is really cogongrass. You can download the cogongrass field guide at www.cogongrass.org/cogongrassid.pdf. You can also contact your natural resources professional to arrange for an expert field determination.

You may wonder why people are so up-in-arms about a grass that you see along many southern roads in the spring, its white seed heads tossed in the wind like a dandelion. Many do not relate a grass with such destructive forces as wildfire, plant pests, and hurricanes. Say the word "kudzu" to any Southerner, and they conjure mental images or stories of covered forests, homesites, and roadways. How could a grass be such a problem?

Cogongrass is considered one of the 10 worst weeds in the world. It is a major problem in over 70 countries, found on every continent except Antarctica. It permanently alters plant and animal communities, including Southern forests. Cogongrass increases fire frequency and intensity, putting homes, animals, and people at serious risk. It requires extensive investment of time, effort, and money to control. It can destroy entire landscapes, creating a 'sea' of cogongrass with no other plants. Domestic food and fiber supplies are impacted through reduction in wildlife food sources as well as killing or injuring valuable crops such as corn, cotton, and trees. Cogongrass is steadily marching through Alabama and into neighboring states, primarily along roads and through logging and farming equipment. It exists on many sites in Alabama, and a large-scale concerted effort must be employed to control it.

At this time, the most effective approach to controlling cogongrass is with either frequent tilling over a year or with repeated chemical applications, sometimes over several years. There are safe herbicides on the market that target particular plant species currently labeled for cogongrass. Many people wonder about other approaches to control such as using manual labor to extract the plant from the soil or incorporating it into the emerging bio-fuels industry. These alternatives are not only extremely labor-intensive and cost-prohibitive, but are also potentially dangerous and can exponentially spread the weed into areas currently devoid of cogongrass.

The ACCC is going to tackle the cogongrass problem head-on in Alabama using several strategies. With input from the Alabama Forestry Commission and the Alabama Cogongrass Task Force's leadership, we have devised a plan to eradicate cogongrass in Alabama on private, non-industrial properties north of US Highway 80, which runs east-west from Columbus, Georgia, to Selma, and on to the Mississippi state line. With this cogongrass eradication zone in place, we will greatly lessen the spread to other Alabama properties and into other states.

In south Alabama, it is a different story. Cogongrass has infested a tremendous amount of acreage and has existed there for decades. Because of this fact — and limited funds — we will attempt to control cogongrass on as many private, non-industrial

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properties as we can south of US Highway 80. We will also focus efforts on an 'advancing front' just south of US Highway 80, along the state's borders, and in high-threat areas such as major roads and arteries.

If you are a private, non-industrial Alabama landowner and currently have cogongrass on your property, you may be eligible to apply for our program. Depending on the property and infestation locations, in addition to other factors, you will be prioritized within the program's strategies. Further details on our strategies and programs will be provided on our website (www.alabamacogongrass.com) in the coming months. If you are interested, download and complete an information form so that we can get in touch with you when we begin accepting applications. If you do not have internet access, call (334) 240-9348 to request a copy.

It is important to note that this program is unlike cost-share programs currently offered by the government. If you are accepted into the program, the ACCC will arrange for the enrolled acreage to be treated, monitored, and re-treated at no cost to you. There are some restrictions on applicants if they are participating in cost-share programs. The enrolled, treated areas cannot qualify for any federal cost-share programs such as CRP or the EQIP program that are specific for cogongrass control.

For more information on the program, 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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