

One Scar

Cogongrass creeping from a roadside into a neighboring pine plantation.



*By Dr. E. L. Barnard
Forest Pathologist & Supervisor
Forest Health Program
Florida Division of Forestry*

Cogongrass. Perhaps you've heard of it. Perhaps you've seen it. Perhaps it's on your property. In any event, if you've not heard of it or seen it, you certainly will. If it's on your property, you'll wish it wasn't.

Cogongrass (*Imperata cylindrica*) has been labeled one of the world's worst weeds, and for good reason. This plant, native to Southeast Asia, was inadvertently introduced into the United States at Grand Bay, Alabama as packing material in boxed citrus plants from Japan in 1912. It was later (early 1900s) tried in Florida and other southern states as a forage crop; an experiment now well recognized as an "oops." It has been estimated that cogongrass now occupies somewhere between 500,000 and 1.25 million acres

in Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas.

So what? Here's the so what. Cogongrass is extremely aggressive and invasive. It crowds out native plant species and destroys habitat for many species of wildlife. It is nearly impossible to successfully regenerate pine seedlings in cogongrass-infested lands due to the excessive competition afforded by the weed. It is a highly combustible plant and seriously alters fire behavior (fires in cogongrass are extremely hot and can be very damaging to pines and other vegetation). Cogongrass spreads by airborne seeds and locally by means of prolific and fast-growing underground rhizomes. If you have the weed, your neighbor may soon have it too. If your neighbor has it, you probably will in time. The plant does not recognize or respect property boundaries and "creeps" under fences. Cogongrass is superb at invading disturbed sites (land disturbed by road building, other construction, logging and silvicultural operations, natural disasters, etc.). Being recognized as both a state and federal noxious weed, cogongrass is regulated; it is illegal to sell hay or sod from cogongrass-infested fields. Human movement of the grass in any fashion is illegal. The presence of cogongrass can have a very negative effect on the use and value of your land.

Sadly, cogongrass is still "on the move." Human-assisted movement is still a major problem. Through ignorance, oversight or indifference we move the

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Cogongrass underneath pines, replacing native vegetation, altering wildlife habitat and fire hazard conditions, and complicating future pine regeneration.

plant's rhizomes in fill soil. Its seeds and rhizomes are moved on machinery operating in cogongrass-infested areas and inadvertently deposited in cogongrass-free areas, especially along roadsides as graders and mowers are utilized in routine road maintenance. Seeds are produced and disseminated by the billions, and the rhizomes just keep on "creeping." Every day that preventive and suppressive action is delayed, the problem worsens across the southern United States. This is the stuff of which scary science-fiction movies are made. But, this is real.

Because of its "public enemy" status, cogongrass is now drawing increased attention in the Southeast as well as the rest of the country. Several state and federal agencies have programs and budgets dedicated to the treatment of cogongrass on public lands. Region 8 of the United States Forest Service, Forest Health Protection has recently funded a \$2.2 million initiative in Alabama, Georgia, Florida and South Carolina dealing specifically with this noxious weed. Cooperative Weed Management Associations (CWMAs) forming throughout Florida and other states are intensifying their focus on cogongrass. A "memorandum of understanding" is being circulated among and signed by a number of southern state forestry agencies to coordinate management and treatment strategies on a regional basis. The State of Alabama has drafted a \$40 million initiative to deal with cogongrass within its borders. From all we know now, it will take all of this and then some to effectively

manage and eradicate (?) this invasive pest plant from the region. This is a big war, and one that will not be won without vigilance over a number of years. Sadly, it is a war that must be fought. Ecological and habitat models suggest that cogongrass may be capable of invading the U.S. as far north as our 45th parallel (north latitude). This means the plant could progress to New England, Michigan, Minnesota and Oregon. It has been reported and is apparently successfully adapting in Idaho; thankfully only in small populations to date.

Cogongrass is only one of many now recognized non-native invasive pest plants with the capability of serious economic and ecological ramifications. It might just be the worst of the bunch. The more we learn about it and the more we do to control it, the better off we and our offspring will be in years to come.

There are dozens of web sites available with extensive information about this noxious weed. Perhaps a good starter is <http://www.cogongrass.org>. Another way to find information is simply to Google® "cogongrass." Or, you may contact your county forester or county extension agent. ■



Cogongrass on fire. This stuff burns hot, complicating fire management.