

Chilean needle grass in Canterbury

Chilean Needle Grass (*Nassella neesiana*, sometimes known as CNG), was first recorded in Canterbury at Spotswood near Cheviot in November 2008. The infestation is thought to have been present in this area for some years and was taken so seriously that Environment Canterbury immediately allocated \$100,000 to help manage CNG for three years. It is now proposed to incorporate CNG in the Regional Pest Management Strategy (RPMS) as a pest by July 2011.

Why is Chilean needle grass a problem?

CNG is a serious threat to farming in Canterbury. It is unpalatable to stock when in seed and can form dense stands in pasture. It is extremely difficult to eradicate once it is established and strict containment processes are required to prevent further spread from known sites.

Because the seed is heavy, it is usually spread in hay or by stock and other animals, as well as on people, machinery and vehicles.

It produces an extremely sharp corkscrew-shaped seed head which catches easily onto passing animals, particularly sheep. It can then burrow into the skin causing severe irritation and wounds to the animals, damaging pelts. Seeds can work their way into tissue, causing abscessing and downgrading carcasses. The corkscrew shape makes the seed difficult to remove once it is embedded in an animal.

How to identify Chilean needle grass

CNG usually occurs in dry, low fertility open habitats. Ungrazed, it can reach over one metre tall and is like a tall fescue in general appearance. Under grazing, it can form dense clumps by producing many shoots at its base. CNG is usually a lighter green than other grasses and appears to shine when the sun hits from certain angles.

CNG is extremely difficult to identify as it blends in well with other pasture species, except between November and March when it produces distinctive seed heads. The seed and tail is around 90–100 mm long, in large, open and drooping flower heads with a purple tinge. Hidden seeds also form at the nodes inside the leaf sheaths and also at the base of the plant. Leaves are 1 to 5 mm wide, strongly ribbed on their upper surfaces, with margins that are rough to the touch. There are tufts of erect hairs on each side of the base of the leaf that are easily seen when the leaf blade is pulled away from the stem.



Could Chilean needle grass spread to your property?

Between CNG establishing at the Spotswood site and its discovery there in November 2008, there is a high probability that CNG spread to other sites in Canterbury, most likely in the Hurunui District. The good news is that a programme to contain CNG was put in place soon after its discovery and this will have significantly reduced its capacity to spread.

What has been done to contain and control Chilean needle grass?

Over the past two years, an intensive control programme has been managed by Environment Canterbury biosecurity staff between September and March in each year to coincide with the timing of seed production by CNG. The programme includes putting strict controls in place to make sure no plant material or seed leaves the site.

The programme has relied heavily on collaboration from land occupiers, particularly the management and staff of the Mt. Beautiful Vineyard where the main infestation occurs. In recognition of this, a Chilean Needle Grass Action Group has been formed. It has been instrumental in gaining Sustainable Farming Fund money to research better ways to control and contain CNG, and to educate the general public about it. Wayne Yates is the chairman. Members of the group are Charles Wiffen, Cr. Vince Daly, Fin Grieve, Jamie Auld, Judith Haugh, together with Laurence Smith, Noel Crump and Ray Maw from Environment Canterbury, and Shona Lamoureaux and Graeme Bourdôt from AgResearch.

Effectiveness of programme to date

After two seasons of control/containment of CNG and with the RPMS midpoint review underway, it is time to review the programme so far and look at its effectiveness. There can be no doubt that what has been achieved to date has been effective in slowing the spread of CNG but the Hurunui community still has an important role to play.



HOW CAN YOU HELP?

Environment Canterbury biosecurity officers are able to identify CNG at all stages of growth; however, they cannot look everywhere. The more people in the community that can identify CNG, the better chance we have of detecting new infestations early.

Please take the time to learn how to identify CNG. Visit www.ecan.govt.nz and search for Chilean Needle Grass for more information or contact a biosecurity officer at our Amberley office. If you think you have found CNG, contact us straight away and we will come to you.

Please don't remove plants or seeds from where you have found them as you may spread a pest plant inadvertently.

Come to the Chilean needle grass field day!

The Chilean Needle Grass Action Group, in conjunction with Environment Canterbury and Mt Beautiful Vineyard, is holding a field day:

22 November 2010, 2.00 - 4.00pm

**Mt Beautiful Vineyard
Waiau East Road, Spotswood.**

On the day, speakers will talk about CNG in Canterbury, discuss future policy and describe what is being done to contain and control it. They will also talk about its potential distribution in Canterbury and what it could mean for you, and the control options available. The afternoon will include a field trip around the vineyard to look at CNG and finish with a BBQ and refreshments.

We can accommodate only 60 people on the day, so if you are thinking of coming along please let us know. We will consider repeating the day if enough people are interested.

For CNG enquiries or for information on the field day, contact Leanne Lye, Biosecurity Support Officer on (03) 314 8014.