

Fireweed

Senecio madagascariensis



Fireweed is an introduced weed that competes strongly with pasture species and is toxic to livestock. Fireweed is responsible for illness, slow growth and poor conditioning of cattle, and can result in death.

Heavy infestations of fireweed often result from neglect of steadily increasing fireweed infestations in previous years, and lack of good ground cover caused by overgrazing, drought, fire or slashing.

Legal requirements

Fireweed is a category 3 restricted invasive plant under the *Biosecurity Act 2014*. The Act requires everyone to take all reasonable and practical steps to minimise the risks associated with invasive plants under their control. This is called a general biosecurity obligation (GBO).



Queensland
Government

At a local level, each local government must have a biosecurity plan that covers invasive plants in its area. This plan may include actions to be taken on fireweed. Some of these actions may be required under local laws. Contact your local government for more information.

Description

Fireweed is an annual or a short-lived perennial. It is a daisy-like herb that can vary greatly in size and shape depending on environmental conditions. In dry, harsh conditions it may be less than 20 cm tall with narrow leaves, no branching and few flowers. In ideal conditions fireweed will grow to 50 cm tall with multiple branches, long wide leaves (6 cm × 2 cm) and about 100 flowers.

The leaves are alternate, dark green with serrated margins, and are usually 2–6 cm long. The flowers are bright yellow, daisy-like with a diameter of approximately 2 cm, and produce up to 100 seeds each. It is very similar to a range of native *Senecio* species.

Seeds are small, cylindrical in shape, and 2–3 mm long. Each seed has rows of very fine short hairs and a silky pappus (parachute). Flowers and seeds are produced continuously over the growing season. An average plant can produce over 10 000 seeds during this time.

Fireweed has a shallow branched taproot with many fibrous roots. The shallow roots often allow plants to fall over in windy conditions. When this happens the stem will sprout roots wherever it touches the ground.

Life cycle

Fireweed can be an annual but many plants do survive through the summer, so plants of all ages can be present at the same time.

Seeds germinate in mild, warm conditions (15–27°C) in the presence of light and moisture. Most seedlings appear between March and June then grow quickly to produce their first flowers in 6–10 weeks.

Fireweed usually begins to die back in spring. The top growth dies, leaving the base and roots that can last through the summer and re-grow in the following autumn. Depending on rainfall, some plants continue to grow and produce flowers, and seed through summer.

A dry summer followed by autumn or winter rains leads to heavy fireweed infestations.

Methods of spread

Seeds spread by wind, stock, in pasture seed, hay, turf, mulch and with stock transport.

Habitat and distribution

Fireweed is native to Madagascar and southern Africa, and was first recorded in Australia in the Hunter Valley in 1918. It is not known how it was introduced, but it could have been brought in privately as a garden plant. It spread slowly at first, but in the last 30 years it has

rapidly increased its range, most likely aided by modern transport and rural practices.

Fireweed is a weed of beef and dairy pasture east of the Great Dividing Range, and is currently established along the entire New South Wales coast and north to Brisbane.

Isolated infestations have been found near Caboolture, Cooroy, Belli Park, Maleny, Yandina, Pelican Waters and as far north as Gympie.

Fireweed is spreading northward and has the potential to infest extensive areas of valuable pasture north of Brisbane. A prediction based on climate and land use suggests that fireweed has the potential to be a serious pest as far north as Rockhampton.

Even light infestations of fireweed can produce 1 million seeds per hectare. Seeds are light and have a pappus that enables them to be carried by the wind. The seeds also have rows of short hairs that can loosely cling to animals. Fireweed can be spread short distances by wind and stock. However, it is spread over greater distances in pasture seed, hay, turf, mulch and with stock transport. Fireweed seed can also be spread as a contaminant in transported materials such as hydromulch and grass seed.

Impacts

Poisoning

Unless fireweed poisoning is severe it can be difficult to detect in cattle, because the symptoms (such as reduced weight gain and/or low milk production) can have a variety of causes.

Symptoms of more severe poisoning are loss of appetite, aimless wandering, loss of coordination, sensitivity to sunlight, jaundice and abdominal straining with rectal eversion. Severe poisoning will result in death, and an autopsy will reveal chronic liver sclerosis.

All growth stages contain pyrrolizidine alkaloids that damage the liver. Fireweed is toxic when green or dry, therefore contaminated hay or silage may be toxic.

Fireweed is generally unpalatable to cattle, so poisoning is most likely to occur when fireweed plants are dense and stock can not feed selectively, or when there is a shortage of pasture and hungry stock are less selective about food.

Sheep and goats are less susceptible to fireweed poisoning and can graze in fireweed-infested paddocks for at least one season. Toxins found in fireweed are able to taint the milk of goats that graze this plant. Goats for milk production should not be allowed to graze in fireweed-infested paddocks.

Control

Managing fireweed

The GBO requires a person to take reasonable and practical steps to minimise the risks posed by fireweed. This fact sheet provides information and some options for controlling fireweed.

The best control for fireweed incorporates integrated management strategies, including herbicides and mechanical methods in addition to vigorous permanent pastures that can compete strongly with fireweed seedlings.

Prevention and early eradication

The best approach to fireweed control is to prevent it establishing by ensuring that there is a dense cover of pasture in autumn and winter. Waiting until autumn to begin pasture improvement will worsen the fireweed problem because fireweed (which germinates in autumn) will be promoted ahead of the pasture by fertilising and direct drilling of winter pasture species.

When small infestations of fireweed are identified, act immediately to prevent the situation from becoming worse and to increase the likelihood of eradication.

Mechanical control

Chip out, bag and burn any isolated plants or dispose of them at council-approved landfill tips. You should not burn any toxic plants in household wood-burning stoves or heaters. Remove chipped-out plants from paddocks because they may still set seed and poison stock.

Slashing is usually not effective as it may lead to increased stock poisoning. Slashing tends to give a good visual effect because it removes the flowers, but at best it delays flowering and seeding and at worst damages the pasture, making conditions more favourable for fireweed.

Fireweed remains toxic after being cut and becomes more attractive to stock and thus more likely to cause poisoning.

Biological control

A number of organisms can be found attacking fireweed, but any effect they have is temporary and isolated. An orange rust (*Puccinia lagenophorae*) is common and often affects fireweed, particularly in lower country. The blue stem borer moth (*Patagoniodes farinari*) is also common, but the larvae usually develop too slowly to have an impact. Two moths imported from Madagascar were host tested. In controlled tests they were found to feed on important non-target plants so no releases were made and all these insects were destroyed.

Other potential biological control agents have been identified, but rigorous testing is needed to ensure that they do not feed on closely related Australian native plants. No new agents are expected to be released in the near future.

Herbicide control

Herbicides are most effective if sprayed before plants reach maturity. However, application during flowering will be effective if higher recommended rates of herbicide are applied.

Research for herbicide controls against fireweed, including residual control methods is ongoing. Trials have shown herbicide application in the autumn period during

April provides good control. Before undertaking such programs landholders are advised to determine the infestation levels.

An effective application method in an open pasture situation is a boom spray. Follow this up by spot spraying, or pulling and bagging any regrowth or missed plants.

Boom spraying is also suitable for follow-up treatments, as it allows destruction of immature plants, which may otherwise grow to re-seed the area before they can be noticed.

Bromoxynil (trade names Bromicide 200, Brominil 200 and Buctril 200) is suitable for use in pastures containing clovers, medics and lucerne, and it will not affect grass.

Bromoxynil is effective if used on seedlings, which usually appear in autumn and early winter but may appear later following rain. Twice as much bromoxynil is needed if it is applied to plants that are just beginning to flower. Bromoxynil is less effective on mature plants, as it is a contact herbicide only. Mature plants will only be killed off where the bromoxynil comes into contact with the plant, allowing recovery of the plant from lower, untouched portions.

APVMA PERMIT 13195 (expires 30 April 2027) permits persons licensed to apply agricultural herbicides by air to apply 2,4-D by helicopter. Consult the permit for details of products and conditions.

Unfortunately, fireweed control is often not considered until the highly visible flowers appear and it is too late for effective control with herbicide.

Prior to using the herbicides listed under PER11463 you must read or have read to you and understand the conditions of the permit. To obtain a copy of this permit visit apvma.gov.au.

Table 1 lists herbicides registered for fireweed control. Before using any herbicide always read the label carefully. All herbicides must be applied strictly in accordance with the directions on the label.

More information

More information is available from your local government office or visit biosecurity.qld.gov.au.

Table 1. Herbicides for the control of fireweed

Situation	Herbicide	Rate	Comments
Agricultural non-crop land, bushland, forests, wetlands, coastal and adjacent areas	2,4-D 625 g/L (e.g. Ken-Amine 625)	300 mL/100 L water or 3 L/ha	PERMIT 11463 (expires 30/04/27) Spot spray only
Agricultural non-crop land, commercial and industrial land, forests, pastures and right-of-ways	Fluroxypyr 140 g/L + Aminopyralid 10 g/L (e.g. Shotup)	500 mL/100 L water	Apply as a high-volume or spot spray to flowering plants up to 30 cm tall
	Fluroxypyr 140 g/L + Aminopyralid 10 g/L (e.g. Shotup)	1.5 L/ha	Boom application
Agricultural non-crop land, commercial and industrial land, forests, pastures and right-of-ways	Triclopyr 300 g/L + picloram 100 g/L + aminopyralid 8 g/L (e.g. Grazon Extra)	350 mL/100 L water	Apply as a high-volume or spot spray when the plant is flowering
Agricultural non-crop land and pastures	2,4-D 300 g/L (e.g. Affray 300)	700 mL/100 L water	Apply as a high-volume spray when the plant is actively growing
Pastures and improved pastures (containing clover and/or lucerne)	Bromoxynil 200 g/L (e.g. Bromicide 200)	1.4 L/ha seedling control, 2.8 L/ha for early flowering plants	Boom application Apply during the autumn–winter period when plants are young and actively growing Not effective on mature plants
Improved pastures (containing clover and/or lucerne)	Bromoxynil 250 g/L + Diflufenican 25 g/L (e.g. Jaguar)	500 mL/ha	Seedling control up to the four leaf stage
Improved pastures (containing clover)	MCPA 250 g/L + Diflufenican 25 g/L (e.g. Tigrex)	1 L/ha	Seedling control up to the four leaf stage
Pastures, roadsides, non-crop areas, rights-of-way, forests, reserves and bushland	Mesulfuron-methyl 600 g/kg (e.g. Nufarm Associate herbicide)	40 g/ha (boomspray) or 10 g/100 L (spot spray). Always add a non-ionic surfactant at 10 mL/100L water	For critical comments for conditions of use, see PERMIT 80929 (expires 31/05/2025)

Read the label carefully before use and always use the herbicide in accordance with the directions on the label.



Fact sheets are available from biosecurity.qld.gov.au. The control methods recommended should be used in accordance with the restrictions (federal and state legislation, and local government laws) directly or indirectly related to each control method. These restrictions may prevent the use of one or more of the methods referred to, depending on individual circumstances. While every care is taken to ensure the accuracy of this information, the department does not invite reliance upon it, nor accept responsibility for any loss or damage caused by actions based on it.

