

COGONGRASS

IMPERATA CYLINDRICA

Photo by Karan A. Rawlins, University of Georgia, Bugwood.org

Cogongrass, *Imperata cylindrica*, is one of the most invasive plants on the planet. Found on every continent except Antarctica, cogongrass is even a pest in its native Southeast Asia. It is particularly insidious as a pest of our forests; it can tolerate the low light conditions in healthy forests, exploding when more light is let in. Since cogongrass increases fuel loads, forest fires or prescribed burns in infested stands can get hotter than the trees can stand. When the trees die, the increased light allows the cogongrass to explode, effectively converting a forest to grassland.

Livestock won't forage on it because it is too tough and has low protein content.

Identification

It can be recognized by an offset midrib, pencil-sized rhizomes that are found below the soil surface, the feathery flowers that are visible in spring. From the air, infestations starting from rhizomes have a distinct oval or round shape as the rhizomes spread concentrically from the center.

How it spreads

It can be spread through seeds (less common in South Carolina) or rhizomes that get stuck on bulldozers or other equipment, making it a good practice to rinse your equipment after visiting a site that potentially has cogongrass.

Managing cogongrass

Tilling up cogongrass can exacerbate infestations by dividing rhizomes. Herbicides, particularly imazapyr and glyphosate, applied according to the label's instructions, are very effective if applied strategically and repeatedly. Herbicides can be applied after burning an infestation once the rhizomes sprout again. Applications in the fall are more effective, as the grass is mobilizing its sugars to the rhizome for the winter and will take the herbicide with it.

Contact information

If you think you know of a cogongrass infestation, contact David Jenkins at the SC Forestry Commission at djenkins@scfc.gov or contact the Clemson Invasive Species Program at <https://www.clemson.edu/public/regulatory/plant-protection/invasive/>.

For information on how you can combat invasive plants in your community visit the South Carolina Exotic Pest Plant website at <https://www.se-eppc.org/southcarolina/> or send an email to southcarolinaeppc@gmail.com.



An aerial view of cogongrass infestations shows the oval shape made as the rhizomes spread. (Photo by Greg Leach, International Paper, Bugwood.org)