



War Journal: Our Fight Against Cogongrass

*By Stephen Pecot, Communications Director,
Alabama Cogongrass Control Center*

Since my last installment in *Alabama's TREASURED Forests*, "The Battle on Our Doorstep: Cogongrass" (Fall 2009), we at the Alabama Cogongrass Control Center have been tremendously busy. Given the scope of the problem and three staff members, it is a monumental and unprecedented assignment. Thank you to everyone who has contacted the program, enrolled for help, given us outreach ideas, provided access to your property, and been patient as we get the program up and running. In just 11 short months, we have watched this program come to life under the leadership of the Cogongrass State Task Force and the Alabama Forestry Commission (AFC). Larson & McGowin, a forestry consulting firm out of Mobile, was selected in September 2009 to be the Coordinator of a \$6.281 million grant from the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (also known as the "Stimulus Bill"). We were given a daunting task, combining decades of inaction and underfunded endeavors into a successful, long-term program that not only creates jobs but also helps landowners while being efficient and transparent. Bill Baisden, former Assistant State Forester of Alabama, gave a succinct order: create a program that helps landowners with one of the world's worst weeds.

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Chris Evans, River to River CWMA, Bugwood.org



Cogongrass (*Imperata cylindrica*) is bad news. Some claim it is worse than kudzu, and many readers are likely nodding their heads in agreement. What makes cogongrass so insidious is the way in which it becomes part of the landscape without you even knowing it, and its uncanny ability to outcompete almost anything. This is the modus operandi for many invasive species. Though the majority of invasives persist in a small niche across the landscape, a small number are referred to as *ecosystem*

transformers (Richardson, David M. et al. "Naturalization and invasion of alien plants," *Diversity and Distributions*, 6[2000]: 93-107). Cogongrass makes a strong case for inclusion in this class. Put another way, kudzu is not even in the Top 10 of the world's worst weeds.

At this point we don't know how much cogongrass is in Alabama. Neighboring states are more fortunate: Tennessee, Georgia, and South Carolina all have a relative handful of infestations compared to Mississippi, Florida, and Alabama. If our initial work is any indication, there are at least three-quarters of a million infestations in Alabama. The number could go much higher, well into the millions.

I heard a landowner say that funding and cogongrass control are positively related. This is partly true but misses the larger picture. Anyone knows that throwing money at a problem without proper planning and oversight will likely not fix it and may lead to unintended problems. What is needed is a common-sense, thorough, efficient, and responsible approach, backed in science that incorporates the best ideas from all parties to affect a mutually beneficial result for everyone.

This is what we are accomplishing with the Alabama Cogongrass Control Center. From the project's inception we have listened to you, the landowner. We've heard your concerns and ideas for fighting this noxious weed. Some have been fighting this plant for decades; others were just recently informed by the AFC, a land manager, or us, that their property has cogongrass.

This program is designed to help private, non-industrial landowners in every Alabama

county. This is not a cost-share program; it is offered at **no cost** to you. Nothing needs to be done by you except to enroll. We take care of it all, including retreating sprayed areas. We do ask that you adhere to our "one property per landowner" rule, and to not enroll areas that are currently receiving cost-share assistance for cogongrass control. Since this is a multi-year program, we are focusing on certain areas in 2010 and adding more in 2011. Though more details are on our website (www.alabamacogongrass.com), in 2010 we are generally treating cogongrass infestations in central and northern Alabama, as well as the state's borders in the south, to create a "cogongrass-free zone." In 2011 we will treat these areas again and begin work in south Alabama, where the lion's share of cogongrass is found. The dividing line between these two operational zones is Hwy 82 running from the Alabama/Mississippi line to Montgomery, and Hwy 80 running from Montgomery to the Alabama/Georgia line. This line is subject to change as we learn more.

How the Program Works

From a landowner's perspective, this program is simple. There is a three-page enrollment form which provides us with information about you and your property, in addition to an access agreement so that we can legally be there. That is the only form you'll ever have to complete for this program. One of our scouts will call you to arrange a site visit, although it may take several weeks or even months for us to get to you. They will map cogongrass on your property using a GPS (global positioning system) and make a determination of the best herbicide prescription for each infestation.

The GPS information collected on your property is used in several ways. Obviously one way is to determine the extent to which we are able to help. We do this through *spatial analysis*, where we compare information from your property with the larger dataset. We ask questions such as: How many infestations are there? How big are they? Are they close to water or other infestations? Does the landowner have a cogongrass treatment program? Are there endangered or threatened habitats or species in proximity? Could we clear this property of cogongrass? These are but a few of the questions asked as we determine placement.

If we are able to help, we will arrange for one of our applicator contractors to contact you and schedule a time for the selected infestations to be sprayed. These contractors are experienced in herbicidal applications and are licensed and insured. Application contractors will be assigned to a local region, thereby cutting down on travel time and increasing the number of local contractors we use. If we are not able to help by spraying, we will give you the best



information for you to do so. If you have more cogongrass than we can spray within our guidelines, you are welcome to enter into a separate agreement with the applicator.

This is a purely voluntary program for all private, non-industrial landowners in the state. There is no ownership size requirement, but depending on the property location, we have restrictions on how many landowners can be helped and how much cogongrass can be treated. Below the eradication line, landowners will enter into a “pool” with other landowners in the area and be selected based on numerous factors. For those selected there is a cap of 10 acres of cogongrass treated per landowner. I am working to raise that restriction and not have to turn some away in highly infested areas. To that end, I will be pursuing more funding in the next year to keep the momentum going.

Conclusion

In my travels around the state, I’ve been fortunate to meet a lot of you. Many of the success stories with regard to treating cogongrass have a consistent thread that may be useful to bear in mind. Effective cogongrass treatment programs have elicited buy-in from *all* groups affiliated with a property, including the landowner, hunting clubs, logging crews, and even adjacent landowners and county roads departments. One landowner pays loggers to keep their equipment clean when moving around the property. Another has educated their hunting clubs on identification and asks them to GPS any new infestations. It likely became a financial choice: do they spend the money now to control cogongrass, or pay *later* in high eradication costs and reductions in timber and hunting lease values? The cost of dealing with cogongrass *later* can exceed that which is necessary to prevent its spread *now*.

Many relate our efforts to Sisyphus, the mythical king who pushed the boulder up the hill for eternity. I don’t subscribe to that view. Yes, cogongrass is found in every corner of our beauti-



ful state. And it does seem a daunting task to make these goals a reality. But we are succeeding in reaching the public and those who may be spreading it without even knowing. And we are educating those who deal with cogongrass in their vocation (farmers, cattlemen, loggers, road maintenance crews) or in their hobbies (sportsmen, hikers) in simple ways they can prevent, mitigate, and control this unwelcome plant that is destroying native ecosystems and our way of life. 🏠

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