



# The ugly side of alligator weed

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## IN A NUTSHELL

- ▶ A tour of alligator weed infested areas in the lower Hunter Valley by a group from Griffith reinforced the need to be proactive in controlling the weed, ie continual monitoring of high risk sites and quick responses to any outbreaks

***The Alligator Weed Awareness Program has been put together to facilitate a greater awareness and understanding of the potential spread of alligator weed in the Griffith area.***

The key to success in managing alligator weed is early identification of both terrestrial and aquatic forms of the weed. To this end, a tour was arranged to view alligator weed infestations in the lower Hunter Valley. On Tuesday 14 June 2005, 15 landholders, contractors and weeds officers from Griffith and surrounding areas boarded a coach and headed to Newcastle. (*We lost 5 to late cancellations – a pity*).

Graham Prichard, Senior Weeds Officer Port Stevens Council and Andrew Petroeschovsky, National Aquatic Weeds Coordinator, kindly organised our itinerary, which included visits to:

- a Hunter River tomato farm

- Fullerton Cove Turf Farm
- CSIRO research site
- Kooragang Wetlands

Upon arrival we all settled in, had a meal and socialised, and participants were able to speak with Andrew Petroeschovsky, about their concerns with alligator weed on their properties.

## Paterson River

Wednesday morning, we travelled to low-lying areas along the Paterson River, where Graham Prichard pointed out some of the control elements set in place to stop the spread of alligator weed from river to irrigation paddocks (Figure 1). We were also able to see areas that had once been totally infested with the weed, but now relatively clear (Figure 2). Inspections still have to be made on a regular basis to control any weeds that might regenerate.



**Figure 1** Booms and gates across the river entrance to irrigation farms – a control measure to help protect this farming area from alligator weed



**Figure 2** Part of the Paterson River previously infested with alligator weed – with a program of control measures and regular inspections the weed is kept at bay



## Tomato Farm

Time constraints did not allow us to look through the farm, however we did have the opportunity to listen to John Meredith, a second generation farmer, who has had to deal with alligator weed for years. John spoke of his focus being on "living with an infestation" that is, changing farm practices which allow him to continue to produce a product, with the threat of alligator weed always present.

We were told that alligator weed had severely damaged his ability to produce crops on a scale that he had done prior to the alligator weed infestation. The costs to him with lost production can be illustrated by the fact that one kilogram of tomatoes returns on average \$4.50. John doesn't need to lose many square meters of productive land for the financial losses to mount up.

Being conscious of the need for a clean product, John has limited options for the use of chemical applications; therefore he has been forced to use physical removal as his main control measure.

## Fullerton Cove CSIRO Research site

This stop was interesting as scientists were busy conducting field trials with herbicides. The field trial involved studying the ability or inability of alligator weed to take up herbicides and the researchers informed us that at this point in time they had not reached any conclusions.

## Fullerton Cove Turf Farm

Across the road from the CSIRO site, a well known alligator weed site was viewed, and this raised questions from participants, which Graham duly answered. We were told how the area had been infested with the weed, until the property was no longer viable as a productive turf farm (Figure 3). The property is so overgrown with alligator weed that it is now only used to graze cattle periodically, as alligator weed can cause cancerous lesions in cattle if eaten regularly.


The turf farm gave the participants a vivid view of what can happen if early detection and control are not carried out at the onset of the infestation. The option of "Doing Nothing" when alligator weed is first detected will have dire consequences for any property owner.

## Kooragang Wetlands

The final stop on the tour was taken up with a look at the ecologically sensitive swamp and estuary area known as Kooragang Wetlands (City Farm) situated north of Newcastle. The area, which is a delta, can become inundated with water at various times, through floods and tidal surges. For this reason, the island is vulnerable to all kinds of infestations and alligator weed is the prime enemy. The manager Robert Henderson spoke to us about his efforts to eradicate alligator weed, mainly the terrestrial form. Roberts's main control was one of physical removal rather than chemical application. Being a productive cattle property as well as a National Park makes the control of alligator weed a difficult proposition in such an ecologically sensitive area.

## Worthwhile

Most participants felt that the trip was well worthwhile, as it gave them a first hand look at what could become a reality on their properties. It is hoped that participants will relay information to fellow farmers in their areas as this will undoubtedly help us avoid an alligator weed infestation.

The final word on the tour is that we need to be proactive in our approach to alligator weed, and this includes continual monitoring of high risk sites, and a quick response to any outbreaks. The option of "Doing Nothing" is not an option. 

## Further information

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**Figure 3** Alligator weed at the Fullerton Cove turf farm - not a pleasant sight! It left an indelible impression on us all, of just how disastrous alligator weed could be if allowed to invade our region.