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FLORIDA

## Cooperative Extension Service

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To: Mr. Steve Segrest, Common Purpose Institute

From: Jim Stricker, County Extension Director

Mark Hebb, District Manager, FDACS, Division of Forestry, District 14

Re: Cogongrass

Date: November 8, 2002

Cogongrass is an aggressive, rhizomatous, perennial grass that was introduced into the U.S. from southeast Asia in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The grass has been in Florida since the 1920's and is now found from west Florida well into south Florida. Cogongrass has little feed value for animals and readily infests disturbed areas along highways, forests, parks and is widespread in the phosphate mine areas in central Florida. Because of its invasive nature and poor nutritional quality it was placed on the noxious weed list.

From an environmental standpoint cogongrass creates a number of problems. When infesting large areas it creates a monoculture by crowding out all other plant species. It essentially destroys existing native wildlife habitat and provides little or no food for wildlife. The second problem is the wildfire hazard created by accumulated plant material.

Cogongrass is well adapted to fire. It thrives on fire and is rejuvenated by periodic fire. Firefighters consider cogongrass to be one of the more volatile fuel types in central Florida because of the chemical nature of the plant including the "waxy" leaf surfaces. The above ground portion of the plant is totally made up of leaf material which grows in an upright position. This arrangement, along with the small leaf blades, which allows good oxygen access to plant surfaces adds to its flammability. Because of its ability to quickly regrow after a fire, cogongrass is one of the few plants that can burn more than once a year.

Establishing trees or other plant material in areas infested by cogongrass is very difficult. Once a new planting is established, cogongrass quickly invades the area and will often crowd out the new planting. It also builds up a fuel supply and, should fire invade the planting, the cogongrass creates an intense fire that destroys most if not all the new planting.

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Smoke from a cogongrass fire is often dense and dark, reflecting the chemical composition of the plant. Not only does the dense smoke complicate suppression efforts, the reduced visibility creates a public safety risk on highways in the vicinity of a fire because of reduced visibility. People with breathing difficulty may also be adversely effected by the smoke.

Suppression of a cogongrass fire is difficult because water doesn't penetrate the grass clumps well enough to ensure that the fire doesn't reignite. The most effective suppression tool is heavy equipment such as blade or plow tractors. In some of the mined sites where cogongrass thrives, the ground is extremely hard and even heavy plows have a hard time penetrating the ground. In addition, the use of mechanical equipment to control cogongrass fires introduces the possibility of spreading the grass to new sites when some of the rhizomes are carried by the equipment.

Cogongrass is an exotic invasive noxious weed that is widespread in Florida and infests hundreds of acres of land in central Florida. Cogongrass not only presents a threat to the natural environment but also presents a public health threat from wildfire and smoke. While it would be nice to think that cogongrass could be eradicated, it would be impossible because it is so widespread and difficult to control. It is important that ways be found to manage cogongrass to reduce both it's environmental impact and public health risk.