

Cogongrass menace



JANNET WALSH/STAR-BANNER

Ecologist Linda Conway Duever stands in a field of cogongrass south of McIntosh. Duever leads the county's fight against the "grass from hell."

County experts call for war on invasive 'grass from hell'

By **SUSAN LATHAM CARR**
STAFF WRITER

LINDA Conway Duever stood in a clump of cogongrass holding a white fluffy seed head in her hand.

"It kills everything," Duever said. "It chokes out everything else in the ground cover, and it makes fire so intense they kill the trees."

Duever, in cooperation with Marion County, has received a grant for \$12,000 from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to develop a cooperative program to help manage cogongrass, an exotic invasive grass, in Marion County. Her firm, Conway Conservation Inc., will match the grant with in-kind services.

She formed the Marion County Invasive Species Management Council, a steering committee comprised of more than 20 private and government entities interested in getting rid of the "grass from hell," as cogongrass has been called.

"Our goal is to get rid of it in 10 years," Duever said. "We are trying to bring the whole community into this."

The first step the Council is working on is getting the cogongrass sites around the county mapped.

"It's scattered all over the county," Duever said. "That's what we have to figure out. How much do we have out there?"

Other efforts will be directed toward education, fire control issues, enforcement of existing regulations and creation of new ordinances, creating an overall strategy for eliminating the pest and implementation of that strategy.

Many of the agencies and individuals that have stepped forward already are treating the problem on their own. But the grass is so invasive that it is a difficult problem to tackle.

One way to kill cogongrass is through repeated application of herbicides like Roundup, which

■ **Cogongrass continues:**
It chokes out other plants. **2B**

COGONGRASS, AN EXOTIC, INVASIVE SPECIES

Scientific name: *Imperata cylindrica*

Also known as: Japan grass, Red Baron

Leaves: 1/2" to 1" wide; 12-30 inches long; midrib is off center; sharp saw-like teeth on the edge

Color: bright yellow and green; reddens in the fall

Height: 1-4 feet

Spreads by: windblown seeds; rhizomes

Seed heads: white, fluffy, like a plume

Rhizomes: white; pointed; creep underground

Problem: highly flammable; smothers native vegetation



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Cogongrass kills all the plants around it, and it also poses a serious fire hazard. Above, the plant's fluffy seed head.

Cogongrass poses serious fire hazard

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have a minimal impact on the environment. Duever said it is best to cut the grass low and then apply the herbicide. Because the plant is so aggressive, repeated applications are necessary, probably four times a year, Duever said.

Greg Barton, Marion County forester with the Florida Division of Forestry said Roundup is an inactive chemical. He said some chemicals leave residuals in the soil but Roundup does not do that. If used properly, it would not hurt the aquifer, he said.

"It's a soil-active chemical," Barton said. "It works only on foliage of the plants it's directly applied to."

Cogongrass came from Southeast Asia. It got to Marion County in packing material that came in from Mississippi, said Duever, who has been a plant ecologist for The Nature Conservancy and a research and naturalist for the National Audubon Society and has worked on numerous ecological projects for such entities as the University of Florida, the U.S. National Park Service, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Southwest Florida Water Management District, to name a few.

She said the grass has no real use except, perhaps, making thatch roofs.

Cogongrass is spread by seed and through aggressive underground creeping rhizomes. The sharp points of the rhizomes pierce through the roots of other plants. It puts out toxins that kill other plants.

The grass is a light yellowish green that has small saw teeth on the edges. It grows about 12-30 inches high. The midrib, or "vein" in the leaf is off-center which helps make it easier to identify.

Cogongrass is so invasive that it kills all the plants around it. In addition to smothering the plants, it also is a tremendous fire hazard. A spark will ignite the grass, and becomes so hot it kills trees. It is also a tremendous threat to homeowners, as was seen in the recent fires in Silver Springs Shores that were caused by cogongrass.

Silver Springs Shores has one of the largest infestations, but patches are seen throughout the county.

"It's a huge problem," said Mickey Thomason, Cross Florida Greenway Manager. "It's probably the worst invasive exotic upland plant we have got in Marion County and probably on the Cross Florida Greenway."

He said his is fighting it on the Greenway land and getting some good results. But, like others who are trying to eradicate the pest, he believes the eradication has to be a joint effort.

"If you deal with it and help get rid of it on your property, and your neighbor has it on their property, it's like hitting your head against the wall."

Gary Nichols, invasive plant program manager for the St. John's River Water Management District, also would like the help of his neighbors.

"We would like to find some way, some task force, that we can address it on private

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property -- find money to support that private person."

He said the number one issue should be education.

John Rudnianyn, a Marion County developer with large land holdings, knows just how hard it is to control cogongrass.

"I have about 5,000-6,000 acres we own and manage," Rudnianyn said. "We have been eradicating it ourselves for three or four years," he said.

"The only way we can get rid of it is get the government involved," he said.

Rudnianyn has forest land and is involved in wildlife management. He raises timber and cattle.

"One way it's being spread now in Silver Springs Shores -- there have been a couple of people that have been cutting it for a quarter of a century, bailing it and selling it for bedding," Rudnianyn said. He said when the farm is through with the animal bedding, they throw it in the field.

"That's one of the ways its spreading in the northwest section of Marion County," he said.

Duever said that another way cogongrass has been spread is through excavation. When the dirt containing the grass is moved from one location to another, it causes another infestation. Mowing road right-of-ways is another way it has been spread.

Ken Stoldt, crew leader in charge of contract maintenance for the Marion County Transportation Roads Division said cogongrass is a problem they have been fighting.

"We have notified all our contractors and road division personnel to make sure they clean their equipment before they move to another area," Stoldt said. "We don't have a spray program right now. We don't have any licensed applicators working for the county." And he does not have any funding either.

Charlie Wells, contract manager for the Florida Department of Transportation's Ocala office, does use herbicides.

"It's a noxious weed," Wells said. "It's kind of a never-ending battle. What you need to have is cooperation not only from private entities and government who owns the roads -- everybody has to work together."

Duever encourages anyone who notices stands of cogongrass to advise her of the location by e-mailing conwayconservation@conway.com.

For more information about cogongrass:

http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/BODY_WG202

<http://www.ag.auburn.edu/agrn/cogongrass/cogongrass%20fact%20sheet.htm>

<http://www.cogongrass.org>

http://www.fl-dof.com/forest_management/fh_invasives_cogon.html

<http://www.fleppc.org>

<http://www.invasive.org>

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