

Ragwort

Ecology Technical Information Note No. 05

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Background

Invasive species and weeds are a problem on many sections of the National Cycle Network. Ragwort is one species that occurs on our land that we may be obliged to control. It is listed as an injurious weeds under the Weeds Act 1959 along with;

- Creeping thistle;
- Spear thistle;
- Broadleaved dock: and,
- Curled dock.

These are all native species that support a variety of insect life. Ragwort in particular is valuable to nature conservation as a good nectar source. However, these species are undesirable in an agricultural context. It is not an offense to have these species on our land but under the Weeds Act 1959 they must not be allowed to spread onto neighbouring agricultural land, especially grazing land.



Of these species, we are most frequently asked to control ragwort. Ragwort is poisonous to horses and other grazing animals and they are more likely to eat it if it is included in their dried feed.

How to recognise common ragwort

The young plants have a rosette of lobed leaves that sit close to the ground. In their second or third year they develop a flowering stem 30 cm to 100 cm tall with clusters of bright yellow, daisy-like, flowers. The leaves are narrowly lobed with the base tight against the plant stem. Ragwort often has the yellow and black striped caterpillars of the cinnabar moth feeding on it.



There are several different species of ragwort which look very similar, of which only common ragwort *Senecio jacobaea* is listed on the Weeds Act 1959. It is recommended that a detailed identification guide is taken out to site to identify the species where needed.

When are we obliged to control this species?

Where ragwort is more than 100 m from land used for grazing or feed production (a low risk situation), no immediate action is required.

Where ragwort is 50 m to 100 m from land used for grazing or feed production (a medium risk situation) Sustrans, or those responsible for managing the route, should consider establishing a control programme to prevent it spreading any closer. Other factors that can be considered do determine the likelihood of the species spreading onto the agricultural land are the prevailing winds, topography, shelter belts, natural barriers, soil type and vegetation cover of receiving land, but once ragwort is established in an area it is quite difficult to eradicate and an early response may be appropriate.

Where ragwort is within 50 m from land used for grazing or feed production there is a high risk situation), action should be taken to prevent its spread onto the adjacent agricultural land.

Control and disposal of ragwort.

Ragwort is toxic. When handling plants (dead and living) precautions must be taken to protect workers. Sturdy waterproof gloves, long sleeves and trousers should be worn. and a facemask used to avoid inhalation of pollen. Where ragwort contacts bare skin it should be washed in warm soapy water, rinsed and dried.

A number of different methods of control are available, and a combination of these might be appropriate. These include manually pulling or cutting the plants (by hand or machine), using herbicides or biological control. These vary in success, expense and labour requirements and therefore the methods used will depend on the area of land to be cleared, the density of the infection and money available. It is likely that either hand pulling or levering or herbicide treatment will be used.

Plants will remain toxic to animals when dried and plants that have been cut/pulled may also still set seed. The method of disposal must therefore take these two factors into consideration.

On-site disposal is preferred to reduce the risk of the species being spread but if large quantities of vegetation are removed on site disposal becomes impractical. If transporting ragwort from the site it should be in sealed bags. Any contractors hired for the disposal must be properly registered and/or licensed with the Environment Agency.

Up to 5 tonnes of ragwort remains can be composted on site in sealed containers inaccessible to grazing animals. Larger quantities require registration with the Environment Agency. For further details see Environment Agency guidance listed at the end of this document.

Up to 10 tonnes can be burnt on site upon registering with the Environment Agency. It must be dried first as fresh ragwort will not burn. The temporary storage to allow the species to dry out must be in sealed containers to prevent the spread of seed and risk of being ingested by grazing animals. The use of a recognised incinerator device is preferred to open fires due to the increased level of control. Check local bye laws before burning any waste on site and ensure fire risk and environmental impacts are minimised.

For further information see

DEFRA Code of Practice to Prevent the Spread of Ragwort 2004
DEFRA Guidance on the Disposal options for Common Ragwort 2005
MAFF Identification of Injurious Weeds 1999