

Wildlife and Countryside Link Ragwort Control Position Statement

Introduction

Wildlife and Countryside Link brings together 32 voluntary organisations concerned with the conservation and protection of wildlife and the countryside. Our members practice and advocate environmentally sensitive land management and food production practices and encourage respect for and enjoyment of natural landscapes and features, the historic environment and biodiversity. Taken together, our members have the support of almost 7 million people in the UK.

1. Common ragwort *Senecio jacobaea* is a native species of the Compositae family found in many natural and semi-natural habitats. It is part of our natural heritage and supports many species of wildlife, including common broomrape *Orobanche minor*, 14 species of fungi and many invertebrates which depend on it for their survival. Common ragwort *Senecio jacobaea* along with other members of the genus and related compositae, contain pyrrolizidine alkaloids that are toxic to grazing animals. Horses, in particular, can be poisoned whether they graze ragwort or consume it in feed or forage, by accumulating a lethal dose over time. Common ragwort is one of five injurious vascular plant species listed on the Weeds Act 1959. This obliges landowners or occupiers to take action in order to prevent the spread of the species on their land.
2. There have recently been calls for the development of a 'common ragwort *Senecio jacobaea* management strategy' in response to a claimed dramatic spread in ragwort. A Private Members Bill sponsored by John Greenway MP and promoted by the British Horse Society is currently passing through Parliament and seeks to improve protection of horses from ragwort poisoning. The Bill if passed will provide statutory backing to a code of practice for controlling ragwort to help landowners meet their obligations under the Weeds Act 1959. A regulatory impact assessment of the Bill is currently subject to a Defra consultation as will the Code of Practice if the Bill is enacted.
3. Defra has stated that "if the Bill is adopted the Code will be admissible in evidence in enforcement proceedings under the Weeds Act". Having passed through the House of Commons, this Bill now has the support of the Government and will have its first reading in the House of Lords on 17th October.
4. Given that this Bill could have consequences for land management where common ragwort is growing, members of Wildlife and Countryside Link have developed this position statement to outline their thinking on the issue. This statement will form the major part of Link's response to both the Code of Practice and the Regulatory Impact Assessment and will inform our briefings on the Equine Welfare (Ragwort Control) Bill.

Statement

Nature conservation value of ragwort

5. As a native species, common ragwort is part of our natural heritage and the UK Government has signed international agreements, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity, to ensure its protection. It is found in a range of dry, sandy or limey grassy places and dunes but flourishes in overgrazed areas. It is an important food plant for common broomrape *Orobanche minor*, 14 species of fungi and a range of invertebrates. 177 invertebrate species have been recorded feeding on ragwort nectar. An information

note produced by English Nature suggests that 'it is the food of at least 77 species of insect herbivore [including five 'red data book' and eight 'nationally scarce' species]: 27 species of moth, 22 species of thrip, 13 species of bug, nine species of flies and six species of beetle. The most famous is the cinnabar moth whose yellow and black banded larva can defoliate entire plants'¹.

In a recent Buglife review (Stubbs 2003) 30 invertebrates were identified which are confined to ragwort; the great majority of which are confined to common ragwort *S. jacobaea*, or the closely related hoary ragwort *S. erucifolius*. This includes 7 Leaf Beetles, 12 Flies, 1 Macro Moth, 7 Micro Moths, 1 Aphid, 1 Thrip, 1 gall causing mite. Seven of these species are Nationally Scarce (3 beetles, 4 flies); indeed one fly may deserve Red Data Book status.

Certain groups of saproxylic insects associated with ancient trees use ragwort as a nectar source. When other sources of nectar are scarce, for example in parkland with improved grass and little flowering shrub habitat, it can be an important source of mid season nectar.

6. Apart from common ragwort there are other species of native ragwort that occur widely in the UK such as hoary ragwort *Senecio erucifolius* and the rare great fen ragwort *Senecio palustris*. Furthermore there are other species which look similar to ragwort e.g. St John's wort *Hypericum* spp., or field fleawort *Tephrosia integrifolia*.

Ragwort's status

7. The New Atlas of the flora of Britain and Ireland indicates that 'the distribution of *S. jacobaea* is unchanged from the map in the 1962 *Atlas*². Although the Atlas map may hide local population fluctuations, no evidence has been provided to support the claim in the Regulatory Impact Assessment that ragwort is 'proliferating' (paragraph 6) and increasing in abundance at 50% a year (paragraph 10). As the RIA states, there have been few complaints or reports on ragwort from the farming sector, which was the sector the Weeds Act was supposed to help. We believe this underpins the case that the plant is not increasing and that the issues is a predominantly to do with the management of equines and their pastures.
8. Wildlife and Countryside Link members view ragwort as a natural component of grassland ecosystems in the UK and as such, it should not be simply labelled as a 'pest' because its effect or influence is entirely dependent on the particular circumstances and abundance in which it might occur. In some instances ragwort can reach high population levels. Any guidance produced on the management of ragwort should enable landowners to better define the abundance of ragwort that constitutes a problem. Such guidance should also avoid emotive words such as 'pest', 'weed', 'contamination' and 'infestation' in relation to the occurrence of ragwort, unless the guidance also carefully defines the prevalence of ragwort that qualifies such categorisations.

Ragwort control

9. Over-grazing can lead to proliferation and careful management to maintain a closed sward structure in pastures is a vital part of a prevention and control strategy. On conservation sites, such as nature reserves, where common ragwort is a natural component of swards with varied structure, including where localised disturbance arises,

¹ English Nature (2003) *Information Note: Common Ragwort Senecio jacobaea. Towards a ragwort management strategy.* www.english-nature.gov.uk.

² Preston, C.D., Pearman, D.A. and Dines, T.D. (2002) *New Atlas of the British and Irish Flora.* Oxford University Press for DEFRA and BSBI.

such as that by rabbits, stock or bridledways, management aims to contain rather than eradicate the plant. In some grasslands common ragwort can flourish and cause localised nature conservation problems by crowding out other native plants. These problems have occasionally arisen on Link member's land including nature reserves. On sites where threatened plant species are growing, Link members seek to control ragwort in these circumstances either by pulling out the plants (taking necessary precautions to prevent ragwort plants coming into contact with the skin) or by spot treatment by dabbing herbicide onto rosettes. These are short-term solutions and the long-term solution which Link members seek is to restore appropriate grazing.

10. As landowners, Link members such as the National Trust, The Wildlife Trusts, The RSPB, Butterfly Conservation, the Woodland Trust and Plantlife, are also responsible under the Weeds Act 1959 to seek to control ragwort on our land and prevent it from spreading to adjacent land when grazing animals could be affected.
11. Wildlife and Countryside Link believes that the management of land used for horse grazing is an important factor. Properly managed pastures are at lower risk of an elevated abundance of ragwort. Link considers that the Code should give precise recommendations to horse and pony owners on the appropriate stocking levels and other pasture management measures needed to reduce development of ragwort seedlings. The Irish Agriculture and Food development Authority website has some useful guidance on horse pasture management.
Link members also believe the quality of hay used for horse feed is important and therefore horse and pony owners should address this risk. This can be achieved either by reducing their reliance on bought in forage, or ensuring that forage is tested before use. Hay producers must therefore have an equal responsibility for ragwort control and should be encouraged to certify that their hay is not contaminated.
12. Rather than introducing more regulation, we believe that there is a need to improve education and instil pride in good pasture/meadow management.

Impact of the proposed legislation and the code

13. Wildlife and Countryside Link supports measures to improve enforcement of existing legislation and particularly to tackle ragwort on a needs-basis. We are however unconvinced that the proposed Private Members Bill or the Code will help to provide a proportionate response to the problem as insufficient emphasis is given to restoring sustainable management regimes.
14. Wildlife and Countryside Link is concerned that the introduction of statutory backing for a code of practice for the control of ragwort might inadvertently increase the use of herbicides and lead to possible damage to non-target species. We therefore question how these new controls would be affected by the Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations (2002) which help landowners and occupiers to consider the environmental effects of changing the way they use their land.
15. Wildlife and Countryside Link recommends that the Code offers stronger restrictions on the use of herbicides for the control of ragwort on Sites of Special Scientific Interest and National Nature Reserves but believes that such a precautionary approach should equally be applied to other sites of biodiversity interest such as local wildlife sites, and locations where Biodiversity Action Plan species occur. The emphasis should be placed on preventing elevated abundances by good pasture management to ensure the appropriate grazing regime is adopted. Where ragwort control is necessary on nature

conservation sites we suggest that there should be support and direction for landowners for alternatives to herbicide use, and think that English Nature and CCW should be given additional funds to support ragwort control by the most appropriate means.

16. Wildlife and Countryside Link does not agree with the assessment of RIA that there 'will be no specific impact on small businesses' or that 'the code will not involve a significant increase in compliance costs'. If the Bill and Codes are successful in extending the implementation of the Weeds Act, this will have a significant cost for those owning and managing grassland throughout England and Wales. Small businesses, not having access to the same machinery, equipment and labour that is available to larger landowners will pick up a disproportionate amount of these costs. Only if the Bill and Code do not result in an increase in action against ragwort will they not result in increased costs.
17. Wildlife and Countryside Link is equally concerned that non-target species will be affected particularly as common ragwort can be confused with other native species. We are aware of cases where non-target species, such as the rare small fleabane *Pulicaria vulgaris* which is included on Schedule 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act, and Tansy *Tanacetum vulgare*, the food plant of the BAP priority Tansy beetle *Chrysolina graminis*, have been inadvertently pulled up in efforts to control common ragwort.
18. The current proposal and code if implemented would considerably extend the area of land where people would be expected to control ragwort. To reduce both the regulatory cost and potential environmental damage it is suggested that areas of land that do not pose a risk to horses should be specifically excluded from any code. Therefore any code should only apply to horse grazed areas and areas used to produce fodder for horses and not encompass other areas where there is no economic case or proven human health case for restricting ragwort growth. Also excluded should be railway and road verges and fields where ragwort is present at a low abundance and extremely unlikely to be eaten by horses.
19. Research published by the Ecological Society of America indicated that 89% of ragwort seed travelled no more than 5m, with none found more than 14m from source. Recruitment is from nearby plants and pest levels of ragwort abundance are dependant on land management, not seed source proximity. It would appear that large buffer zones would have a comparatively small benefit. Therefore we consider that the current definitions within the draft code of land within high, medium and low risk are inappropriate.
20. Wildlife and Countryside Link is of the view that implementation of any new regulatory instrument that has the potential to have a widespread impact on the environment should be properly assessed. In the first place a review of the science should be undertaken to establish the full facts of the issue and in the second an environmental impact assessment should be completed. We are concerned that in this instance neither have been undertaken. The absence of an agreed scientific position and the level of uncertainty about the environmental impacts undermine the credibility of the proposed actions.
21. Wildlife and Countryside Link has great sympathy with owners whose animals die as a result of poisoning from ragwort. The National Trust, a Link member and one of the country's biggest landowners, has not experienced such a problem with animals grazing on its land. We are therefore keen to have more reliable data on the frequency of horse

deaths. We are concerned that the draft Code states that there are no baseline statistics relating to horse deaths specifically from ragwort poisoning which means it is impossible to know the true extent of the problem or to be able monitor the impact of the proposed code. Taking action by the introduction of new legislation and a new code on the basis of speculation and hearsay appears to contradict the increasing emphasis on managing the countryside through an 'evidence-based' decision making process.

Conclusion

22. In conclusion, in the absence of any evidence that ragwort is increasing and reliable data on the frequency of horse deaths Wildlife and Countryside Link will not endorse the code. Indeed even if information was forthcoming greater emphasis must be given to the conservation importance of ragwort and the need to invest in the prevention of infestations by good pasture management rather than widespread herbicide application.

This statement is supported by the following organisations:

British Ecological Society

Buglife, the Invertebrate Conservation Trust

Butterfly Conservation

Campaign to Protect Rural England

Herpetological Conservation Trust

National Trust

Plantlife

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust

The Wildlife Trusts

Woodland Trust