



Australia's Front Door Wide Open to New Weeds

Australia's borders are wide open to invasion by thousands of new weeds.

This impending invasion is entirely legal due to a quarantine law loophole left open by Biosecurity Australia.

It is currently legal to import **over 4,000** known agricultural and environmental weeds not yet found in Australia, according to a new study, *Front Door Wide Open to Weeds*,¹ undertaken by the University of Western Australia and the Cooperative Research Centre for Australian Weed Management, and commissioned by WWF Australia.

Weeds cost agriculture and the environment dearly

Weeds cost Australia an average of **\$4 billion a year** and cause large production losses in the beef, wool and wheat industries. This equates to \$1 lost out of every \$7 Australia's farmers earn in exports. The cost has doubled in just 20 years and is likely to increase.²

Weeds have also caused the extinction of at least four native species and continue to endanger many threatened species,³ endangered ecosystems and World Heritage areas. They are the second biggest threat to Australia's ecosystems and wildlife, and over the next several years are expected to become the number one immediate threat to nature.

The cause of the problem

The source of this biosecurity risk is a loophole in Australia's border controls - Schedule 5 (Permitted Seeds List) of the *Quarantine Proclamation 1998*. The Permitted List currently includes over 6,600 entries.

The List should only include plant species permitted for import into Australia.

However, the List currently includes nearly three thousand species groups or 'genera', a throw-back to an earlier border control regime. The 2,916 permitted genera include thousands of known weedy plant species but these plants are not required to undergo any kind of weed risk assessment and can be imported into Australia without impediment. This substantial weakness undermines both the intent and purpose of the stronger and more scientifically-based border control measures introduced in 1997.

The result of the problem

Front Door Wide Open to Weeds found that the loophole in the permitted list of plants allows the legal importation of:

- Over 125,000 plant species without any form of weed risk assessment, over 4000 of which are known agricultural and environmental weeds not yet present in Australia
- Many weeds that are close relatives to Weeds of National Significance such as bridal creeper, pond apple and *Hymenachne*
- All plants in the same species group (genera) as many other significant Australian weeds, such as grader grass, bellyache bush, arum lily, Scotch broom, pampas grass, kochia, wild radish and annual ryegrass
- Plants in the same species group where over 50 per cent of their species are known weeds, such as dandelions and thistles.

Table: List of Weeds of National Significance (WONS) nominees and the number of their weedy relatives on the Schedule 5 Permitted List that are *not yet* present in Australia

WONS nominee in a permitted genus	Common name	Number of weedy relatives permitted for importation but not yet present in Australia
<i>Jatropha gossypifolia</i>	Bellyache bush	6
<i>Thunbergia grandiflora</i>	Blue thunbergia	1
<i>Schinus terebinthifolia</i>	Brazilian pepper	1
<i>Genista monspessulana</i>	Broom	4
<i>Sporobolus indicus</i> var. <i>major</i> , <i>S. natalensis</i> and <i>S. pyramidalis</i>	Giant Parramatta grass and Giant rat's tail grass	13
<i>Themeda quadrivalvis</i>	Grader grass	3
<i>Hydrocotyle ranunculoides</i>	Hydrocotyl	16
<i>Hyptis suaveolens</i>	Hyptis	11
<i>Bassia scoparia</i>	Kochia	8
<i>Pennisetum polystachion</i>	Mission grass	10
<i>Cortaderia</i> spp.	Pampas grass	1
<i>Ligustrum lucidum</i> and <i>sinense</i>	Privet	1
<i>Cytisus scoparius</i>	Scotch broom	3
<i>Sida</i> spp.	Sida	29
<i>Stachytarpheta</i> spp.	Snake weed	2
<i>Erica lusitanica</i>	Spanish heath	1
<i>Elephantopus mollis</i>	Tobacco weed	1
<i>Reseda luteola</i>	Wild mignonette	7

The study also profiles 20 serious agricultural and environment weed species not yet present in Australia that would be prohibited from import into Australia if they were subject to a weed risk assessment, but are able to be legally imported into Australia through the weakness in the Permitted List. These include:

- **corn brome grass** (*Bromus arvensis* L.), a common weed and grain seed contaminant of cereal crops. Also a weed of orchard, fruit and vegetable crops
- **Portuguese broom** (*Cytisus striatus*), a serious environmental weed in California that displaces native plant species and produces toxic seed. The plant also burns easily and is capable of carrying a fire high into the tree canopy
- **Small geranium** (*Geranium pusillum* L.), a common weed in virtually all cropping systems in Europe that has also naturalised in North and South America and New Zealand

- **Pitted morning glory** (*Ipomoea lacunosa* L.), a weed in Japan, United Kingdom, North America and northern Europe whose seed contaminates agricultural produce, especially grain and grain products
- **Persian ryegrass** (*Lolium persicum*), a serious weed of cereal crops in North America and Europe that causes significant yield losses as well as lowering the quality and grade of the grain
- **Macaranga** (*Macaranga mappia*), planted as a garden plant in Hawaii, the weed has spread throughout much of the island's moister habitats forming dense stands that kill off all native plants
- **Broad leaved meadow grass** (*Poa chaixii*), introduced into the United Kingdom as a garden plant and naturalised 50 years later. Seed is still available from nurseries over the internet. It is a widespread agricultural weed throughout Europe.

Examples of what the quarantine law loophole means for rural industries and the environment

- **Pastoralists:** All new weeds in the same group as belly-ache bush can be legally imported.
- **Croppers:** All new weeds in the same group as wild radish, grader grass and annual ryegrass can be legally imported.
- **Environment:** 30 or more known weeds in the same group as knapweeds (*Centaurea*), blackberry (*Rubus*), morning glory (*Ipomoea*) and *Cotoneaster* can be legally imported.
- **Environment:** Relatives of broom, privet, and blue thunbergia can be legally imported.

Government policy promise well overdue

The Australian Government committed to fix this problem by 2001 under target 4.1.2 of the *National Objectives and Targets for Biodiversity Conservation, 2001-2005*.⁴ However, over two years after the promised deadline **only one** of the 2916 species groups has been removed from the Permitted List.

The delay in fixing this loophole exposes Australian agricultural industries and ecosystems to a significant, unnecessary and unwarranted risk of economic and environmental costs and needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Fixing this problem is the cheapest and most straight forward action the Australian Government can take to prevent any new weed problems impacting on our nation.

To close this loophole quickly, cheaply and with minimal disruption to importers, WWF Australia has proposed a 4 point plan to Biosecurity Australia and the Australian Government based on revising the Permitted List combined with changed AQIS procedures, while a long term review by Biosecurity Australia is undertaken.

The WWF Australia 4-point solution to close the quarantine law loophole

1. **Develop a list of species on the Permitted List that have previously passed a weed risk assessment**
2. **Notify stakeholders and the public that:**
 - the Permitted List will be amended on a specified date to remove all genera, and species under official control, and only include species that have previously passed a weed risk assessment.

- import protocols will be revised on the specified date to so that for species not on the amended Permitted List, importers will be required to identify the plant to species level. AQIS would then validate the scientific name and determine if the species has been previously imported/present in Australia, or not.
 - If the plant species has been previously imported or is known to be widely present in Australia but not under official control the plant becomes a permitted import and is placed on the Permitted List.
 - If the plant species has not been previously imported and/or is not known to be present in Australia, it must undergo a WRA and a decision about its status made. If it passes a WRA it becomes a permitted import; if it fails a WRA it becomes a prohibited import
- 3. Implement the above arrangements on the specified date**
- 4. Biosecurity Australia continue the assessment reviews of previously permitted genera** whereby individual species are assessed for eligibility for addition to the Permitted List.

Further information

The *Front Door Wide Open to Weeds* report and this summary can be downloaded from the WWF Australia web site at www.wwf.org.au


New Weeds Coming Through the Front Door: An Example

An example of a known weed that was recently legally imported into Australia due to this weakness is bear-skin fescue (*Festuca gautieri*); the genus *Festuca* is on the Permitted List and consequently allows the import of all *Festuca* species.

The grass was imported into Australia to be used in rehabilitation works, and is now available for sale. Native to parts of France and Spain, it has low grazing palatability and dominates grasslands in its native range. It has the potential to reduce pasture holding capacity in agricultural systems and impact on the biodiversity and structure of native grasslands.

The Western Australia Government used a weed risk assessment to determine that this plant is high risk and consequently banned its import into the state.

The modelled potential distribution of *F. gautieri* in Australia spans southern Australia from east of Albany in Western Australia through to just west of Melbourne, including north-east Tasmania.



Potential distribution of bear-skin fescue: a known agricultural and environmental weed

References

- ¹ Spafford Jacob, H., Randall, R. and Lloyd, S. 2004. *Front Door Wide Open to Weeds: an examination of the known weed species permitted for import without weed risk assessment*. WWF Australia: Sydney.
- ² Sinden, J., Jones, R., Hester, S., Odom, D., Kalisch, C., James, R. and Cachio, O. 2004. *The Economic Impact of Weeds in Australia*. Technical Series No. 8. CRC for Australian Weed Management: Adelaide.
- ³ Leigh, J. H. and Briggs, J.D. 1992. *Threatened Australian Plants: overview and case studies*. Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service: Canberra.
- ⁴ Commonwealth of Australia. 2001. *National Objectives and Targets for Biodiversity Conservation, 2001-2005*. Environment Australia: Canberra.