



POSITION STATEMENT ON RAGWORT CONTROL IN THE UK

Remit: UK

Sections 1-21 available for public dissemination

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Introduction

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. As a native plant, it is protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, which means that it is illegal to uproot unless you are the owner or occupier of the land where it is growing or have their authorisation, or have written authorisation from the relevant authorities. It is however considered highly toxic to grazing animals. Horses, in particular, can be poisoned whether they graze ragwort or consume it in feed or forage. It is one of five injurious vascular plant species listed on the Weeds Act (1959). A specific order can be made under the Act to oblige a landowner or occupier to take action to prevent the spread of the species on their land.
2. In response to a claimed dramatic spread in ragwort, there have been calls for the development of a 'common ragwort *Senecio jacobaea* management strategy'. In February 2004, the Ragwort Control Act (2003) came into force in England and Wales, as a result of a Private Members Bill sponsored by John Greenway MP and promoted by the British Horse Society, seeking to improve protection of horses from ragwort poisoning. In July 2004, the Code of Practice¹ on how to prevent the spread of ragwort was launched in England and further guidance² followed in September 2005.
3. Defra stated that the new Ragwort Control Act "enables the Secretary of State, or National Assembly for Wales, as appropriate, to make a Code of Practice for landowners and occupiers to prevent the spread of Ragwort. It will also assist landowners and others to strike the right balance between the protection of animal welfare and the need to preserve bio-diversity within the countryside. The Code will also be admissible in evidence if enforcement proceedings under the Weeds Act are necessary".

¹ DEFRA (2004) *Code of practice on how to prevent the spread of ragwort.*

² DEFRA (2005) *Guidance on the disposal options for common ragwort.*

4. Given that the Ragwort Control Act has consequences for land management where common ragwort is growing, Plantlife has developed this position statement to outline its thinking on the issue.

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 limy 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. 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'³.
6. Apart from Common Ragwort there are six other species of native ragwort that occur in the UK, including the widespread Hoary Ragwort *Senecio erucifolius* and Heath Ragwort *Senecio sylvaticus*, and the critically endangered Fen Ragwort *Senecio palustris*. Furthermore there are other species which look similar to ragwort e.g. St John's-Wort *Hypericum* spp., Small Fleabane *Pulicaria vulgaris*, Field Fleawort *Tephrosieris integrifolia* and Tansy *Tanacetum vulgare*. These species could be readily mistaken for ragwort by the non-botanist and damaged or destroyed as a consequence.

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*⁴. In a detailed study of local vegetation changes, *Change in the British Flora 1987-2004* reports that the frequency of *S. jacobaea* has not significantly changed since 1987. There is no evidence 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).

Ragwort control

8. Careful management of grassland to maintain a closed sward structure in pastures is a vital part of a prevention and control strategy. In poorly managed grasslands Common Ragwort can flourish and cause localised nature conservation problems by crowding out other native plants. This has occasionally arisen as a problem both on Plantlife nature reserves and on sites where Back from the Brink species are growing. Plantlife seeks to control ragwort in these circumstances either by pulling out the plants by hand (taking necessary precautions to prevent ragwort plants coming into contact with the skin) or by spot treatment by dabbing herbicide onto rosettes. While these methods are effective, they can be short-term. A better solution, where disturbed bare ground is not required for conservation, is to restore

³ English Nature (2003) *Information Note: Common Ragwort Senecio jacobaea. Towards a ragwort management strategy.* www.english-nature.gov.uk.

⁴ 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.

appropriate grazing, at low levels and with appropriate animals, to ensure sustainable management. Plantlife notes research at Silwood Park⁵ that indicates that fencing against rabbits can be an effective technique to control ragwort. Letting ragwort set seed kills parent plants, whilst minimising soil disturbance and gap creation by rabbits. This in turn prevents seed germination.

9. Plantlife believes that landowners and occupiers should have a duty of responsibility for proper land management when horses are present. Properly managed pastures are at lower risk of ragwort spread. The **SAC Technical Note** (May 2005) includes useful guidance on improving grassland management.⁶ Hay producers must also have responsibility for ragwort control and should be encouraged to certify that their hay is not contaminated.
10. There remains an urgent need to improve education and instil pride in good pasture/meadow management.

Disposal options for ragwort

11. Plantlife supports the disposal options outlined in the DEFRA guidance on the disposal options for common ragwort (2005).

Impact of the Ragwort Control Act (2005) and code of practice in England

12. Plantlife supports measures to improve enforcement of existing legislation and particularly to tackle ragwort on a needs-basis. We were pleased that the DEFRA Code of Practice clearly states that "The code does not seek to eradicate ragwort, but only seeks to control it where there is a threat to the health and welfare of animals." We are however concerned that the Act or the Code does not help to provide a proportionate response to the problem as insufficient emphasis is given to restoring sustainable management regimes.
13. Plantlife is concerned that the introduction of statutory backing for the code of practice for the control of ragwort in England will inadvertently increase the use of herbicides and lead to possible damage to non-target species. We note that **the environmental appraisal of the code**⁷ states that "Given that the use of a broad spectrum herbicide is generally the most effective means of controlling ragwort, it is possible that their use will increase, particularly on agricultural and amenity land." If this were to happen, this would contravene the Government's own pesticide minimisation strategy. Plantlife remains concerned that not all local authorities and landowners are taking a strategic coordinated approach to ragwort management by undertaking the necessary assessment of risks to livestock and risks to the environment.
14. Plantlife recognises that the Code (Appendix 4) recommends a cautious approach to ragwort control on Sites of Special Scientific Interest and National Nature Reserves by requiring approval from the competent authority. We are pleased that the code recommends that this approach is extended to sites with nature conservation

⁵ Crawley, M. J. (2005) Crawley MJ (2005) *The Flora of Berkshire*. Brambleby Books, Harpenden. 234-235.

⁶ Scottish Agricultural College (2005) *Technical Note TN570: Ragwort poisoning in livestock: prevention and control*. <http://www.sac.ac.uk/mainrep/pdfs/ragwortpoisoning.pdf>

⁷ Appendix 10 of the DEFRA (2003) *Code of practice on how to prevent the spread of ragwort*.

interests such as local wildlife sites, and locations where Biodiversity Action Plan species grow. We welcome the emphasis on preventing infestations by good pasture management to ensure the appropriate grazing regime is adopted, although we note that the environmental appraisal of the code also states that “it is likely that designated conservation sites and other sites with biodiversity value will come under increasing pressure for more rigorous control. Some of these non designated sites may be damaged by inappropriate or ill informed control measures.”.

15. Plantlife 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 critically endangered Small Fleabane *Pulicaria vulgaris* which is included on Schedule 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act, have been inadvertently pulled up in efforts to control Common Ragwort.
16. The code of practice considerably extends the area of land where people are expected to control ragwort. Plantlife believes that the code should only apply to horse grazed areas and areas used to produce fodder for horses and should not include measures where there is no economic case or proven human health case for restricting ragwort growth. Railway and road verges and fields where ragwort is present at low abundances and extremely unlikely to be eaten by horses should also be excluded.
17. 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. Large buffer zones are likely to have a comparatively small benefit. The definitions in the code to assess the risk posed by ragwort are therefore inappropriate.
18. Plantlife has great sympathy with owners whose animals die as a result of poisoning from ragwort. We are aware that one of the country’s biggest landowner’s National Trust 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 and livestock deaths. We are concerned that the **environmental appraisal** of the code states that “it is unsatisfactory not to have more accurate data on the number of animal deaths” as a result of ragwort poisoning. It is impossible to know the true extent of the problem or to be able to 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 in managing the countryside on ‘evidence-based’ decision making.

General guidance on good pasture and meadow management

20. Good grassland management can help prevent invasion and spread of Common Ragwort. Bare ground and gappy swards are more susceptible to invasion by ragwort than closed swards, so adopting a management regime that avoids damaging the sward is vital to effective prevention and control. Damage from the following should be avoided, particularly in wet conditions when such damage is more likely to occur:

- Overgrazing - ensure numbers of grazing animals are regularly adjusted according to the amount of grazing available and the ground conditions.
- Vehicle movement causing rutting
- Spoil dumping e.g. from ditching or river bank maintenance
- Poaching and heavy trampling of the ground caused by overstocking and frequent animal movement.
- Animals regularly congregating in one area for feed.
- Creation of bare patches by burning.

Conclusion

21. In conclusion, in the absence both of any evidence that ragwort is increasing and reliable data on the frequency of horse deaths, Plantlife believes that, while the code is a first step, it is not a proportionate response to ragwort control. 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.