

Wiltshire Council

Environment Select Committee

8 January 2019

Background

During the meeting of the Environment Select Committee on the [4 September 2018](#), the Committee resolved to consider a briefing note at their next meeting on the Council's policies surrounding ragwort; as it had been highlighted by a member that there were legislative duties surrounding the growth of ragwort in England.

Main Considerations

Toxic alkaloids are present in all parts of ragwort and, if ingested, ragwort can cause loss of life to livestock through liver damage. Livestock poisoning mainly arises from eating contaminated hay. The plant can become a major weed of waste or other uncultivated ground and thus, ragwort is rarely a problem in gardens, yet, may occur in pony paddocks, railway embankments and areas of unimproved pasture.

The [Ragwort Control Act 2003](#) has led to the provision of [a code of practice](#), published by the Department for Environment, Fisheries and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), that gives guidance on preventing the spread of ragwort in situations where it is likely to be a danger to horses and other livestock. The code does not seek to eradicate ragwort, only to control it where there is a threat to the health and welfare of animals.

The Government has listed ragwort as one of the five weeds covered by the [Weeds Act 1959](#); which states that ragwort is harmful to equines and other animals. However, as set out in the Code of Practice, Government considers that in the right place, and where there is no risk to animal welfare, ragwort contributes to the biodiversity of flora and fauna in the countryside. Therefore, the Government does not support the complete eradication of ragwort, but only seeks to control it where there is a threat to the health and welfare of animals.

Responsibility to Control

The responsibility for controlling the spread and growth of ragwort rests with the occupier of the land on which ragwort is growing. Government advise that occupiers of all land, (including uncultivated land, derelict and waste areas) should be vigilant for the presence of ragwort. Action to prevent its spread should be taken where ragwort poses a high risk to land used for grazing, or forage production. Livestock owners need to be satisfied that their livestock is not exposed to the risk of ragwort poisoning.

In order to prevent ragwort seed production, mowing is at best a short-term measure; as it causes plants to persist and re-grow. Pulling is a more effective strategy, however, it is only feasible for small infestations and re-growth can occur from detached roots left in the soil. The Government supports strategic management as

opposed to last-minute control, as the most effective way to manage the growth and spread of ragwort.

Enforcement

Natural England will take enforcement action under the Weeds Act, where ragwort poses a high risk to horses, other livestock, the production of conserved forage or other agricultural activities. Where a potential problem is identified, contact should first be made with the owner/occupier or relevant body responsible for the land on which the ragwort is growing, to attempt to resolve the matter informally, before contacting Natural England.

Wiltshire Council Comment

Under its responsibilities as a landowner, Wiltshire Council's Highways team clear ragwort when it is reported. The authority carries out no other work in relation to the proactive monitoring of ragwort but refers enquiries to the Natural England reporting form

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/696279/weed-complaint-form.pdf

Proposal

That the Environment Select Committee:

- i. Notes the contents of the Briefing Note and the responsibility of the land occupier for monitoring and controlling the growth and spread of ragwort
- ii. Notes the Council's role in monitoring and controlling the growth and spread of ragwort in Wiltshire

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Background Documents

Garden Organic, Common Ragwort [[online](#)]

Royal Horticultural Society, 2018, Ragwort [[online](#)]