

Southern Invasion

Publications now available on two grass invaders from Mexico.

by Steve Byrns, Texas AgriLife Extension

The Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service announces new publications on two opportunistic and invasive grasses from Mexico now spreading into some Edwards Plateau and Concho Valley pastures, said Morgan Russell, lead author of both publications.

Russell, AgriLife Extension range specialist at San Angelo, said the culprits are Mexican needlegrass, which is infiltrating mostly from oil and gas operations, and Mexican feathergrass, a popular ornamental, which is escaping landscapes and cropping up on rangeland.

The publications are *Mexican Needlegrass* by Russell and Roger “Jake” Landers, AgriLife Extension range specialist emeritus at Menard (www.agrilifebookstore.org/Mexican-Needlegrass-p/erm-039.htm),



Mexican needlegrass

and *Mexican Feathergrass* by Russell and Barron Rector, AgriLife Extension range specialist at College Station (www.agrilifebookstore.org/Mexican-Feathergrass-p/erm-039.htm).

Mexican needlegrass

“Mexican needlegrass is an introduced species from Mexico, though we don’t know how it first got here,” Russell said. “Range professionals are getting more

questions about it as ranchers notice the grass in their pastures, mostly along disturbed sites such as oil-and-gas locations, pipelines and along caliche roads.”

Russell said identification is straightforward as the grass is very noticeable when spotted in pastures.

“It can look a lot like Texas

wintergrass, which is a very common species to most ranchers here,” she said, “but it is much rougher and coarser, with very saw-toothed leaves that scratch when you wrap your hands around it. ... That texture is why livestock mostly shun it.”

Russell said Landers first noticed the grass more than 30 years ago in Menard County and wrote a paper on it in the 1980s. The flurry of interest waned until today’s resurgence in population and



Mexican feathergrass

PHOTOS BY MORGAN RUSSELL, TEXAS A&M AGRILIFE EXTENSION SERVICE

density, making that earlier work useful now.

Mexican feathergrass

Mexican feathergrass is a common plant material in the region's landscape trade, Russell said.

"It's kind of ironic that Mexican feathergrass is such a threat to native pastures," she said. "It's a great ornamental grass here, and you see it all over. It's very fine-textured with a pretty seedhead, and it doesn't become overgrown like some other grasses do in the landscape.

"Aside from its beauty, it's popular because it's so well-adapted to dry, arid environments and very shallow soil," she continues. "It can practically be planted in a flower bed and walked away from, and it will maintain itself."

Russell said problems occur when it escapes those flower beds into native pastures.

"In some areas where it has escaped, we are noticing prolific seed production and establishment in nearby ornamental landscapes and also in pastures surrounding those ornamental landscapes," she said. "Consequently, we're watching rangeland being invaded by this grass in some areas."

Russell said Mexican feathergrass has been declared a noxious species in California and a couple of other Western states, but not in Texas, though the potential and opportunity exists for it to become a problem.


"The more word we get out to groups and individuals buying this grass for ornamental purposes, the better educated and informed they and the general public will be concerning this grass," she said.

Mexican feathergrass is palatable, she said, but only during the prime growing season.

"Once it produces its seedhead, it rapidly deteriorates in palatability

and nutritional value, so most grazing livestock given the choice will venture away from it to graze more desirable forage. Doing so further gives this invader a competitive edge as the better plants are eaten, thus lessening the competition for water and nutrients.

"We've had some cold weather, and these grasses will be going dormant if they are not already," she said. "They are perennial though, and will green up again next spring, so producers should make a point to keep an eye out for them next year."

For information on these and other rangeland issues, contact Russell at 325-653-4576 or morgan.russell@ag.tamu.edu. 

Editor's Note: Extension specialist Steve Byrns is the agricultural communications editor for Texas A&M AgriLife Research and Extension Center at San Angelo. He can be contacted at 325-653-4576 or s-byrns@tamu.edu.

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