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Feral Herald

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Will this Grass Pass?

by Tim Low

Many of the world's worst weeds are grasses, so proposals to sow new exotic species must be viewed with great concern. But Australia's salinity problems are now so pressing that proponents of new salt-tolerant grasses – and legumes – are claiming the high moral ground.

Last October, the South Australian government conducted a weed risk assessment of a salt-tolerant North American grass, *Distichlis spicata*. The names by which this grass is known are alarming, suggesting great ecological versatility – 'seashore saltgrass', 'marsh spikegrass', 'inland saltgrass' and 'desert saltgrass'. An American company, NyPA International, is trialing the grass in southern Australia with a view to marketing it as a turf and pasture grass for salt-degraded lands.

Several months earlier a weed risk assessment of the grass was conducted by the Western Australian government. It noted that the saltgrass, in its native North American environment, "has spread to the irrigated lands, and become a pest in ditches, cotton fields, and other crops in the United States...". It is extremely widespread, occurring as far north as Canada and in subtropical environments such as Hawaii.

It is 'highly polymorphic', occurring in many forms, is strongly rhizomatous, and is seldom grazed when other grasses are available. The assessment further states that the grass "has adapted to a range of soil conditions ranging from intertidal river mouth deltas and hyper saline salt flats to only moldy saline or alkaline soils. The grass can, once established, survive extreme annual droughts and is extremely competitive in very wet soils but is normally associated with inundated soils..." It has become a weed in Argentina and Chile as well as North America and Hawaii.

All the evidence strongly suggests this grass should not be grown in Australia. Beyond any doubt, it is a domineering habitat-altering weed. The small trial plots in Victoria, Western Australia and South Australia could easily be removed.

'There is certainly a weed risk,' I was told, but said this would have to be balanced against any benefits the grass could provide. If the benefits clearly outweighed the environmental costs, the South Australian government would probably allow the grass to be grown.

The Invasive Species Council is very concerned about the prospects of this grass becoming a major environmental weed in Australia.

We do not believe that planting a highly invasive grass is a satisfactory way to counter Australia's salinity problems. It merely creates a new problem in response to an old one. The grass will not be planted to reverse salinity, rather, it will be grown to make saline land more productive.

