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Department of Agriculture, Western Australia

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Ryegrass disease could spread

The disease annual ryegrass toxicity kills sheep and cattle grazing pastures which contain infected annual ryegrass. The disease results when a nematode (tiny worm) and a bacterium together invade annual ryegrass and cause the seedheads to become toxic as the grass dries off.

In Western Australia the first confirmed outbreak was in 1968 in the Gnowangerup area, although a previously suspected outbreak had been reported from a Katanning property in 1959. As shown by the map, the disease has now spread over a range of 450 kilometres and with a total area of perhaps 100,000 hectares.

Because annual ryegrass is the major sown pasture grass in W.A. the disease could spread throughout the South-West.

This possibility demands precautions to prevent its spread. Some of these precautions are listed below and further information is available in Department of Agriculture publications.

While the Department of Agriculture is checking that annual ryegrass toxicity is not spread by sales of ryegrass seed, it is likely that farmers can reduce further spread especially within properties, by being cautious about machinery and produce movement.

Some methods of spread of annual ryegrass toxicity are well known. Local spread has been associated with wind-blown nematode galls in South Australia, with water in creeks in W.A., and with transport of seed, hay or sheep in some outbreaks in both States. More extensive spread is probably related to long distance movements of people, livestock, vehicles, produce and farm equipment.

However, the relative importance of these methods is unknown and it makes sense to take all the precautions possible. Any movement of soil or produce could spark a new outbreak.

The following are worthwhile precautions.

- Become familiar with paddock signs of annual ryegrass toxicity. The first danger sign is the appearance of yellow bacterial slime on ryegrass seedheads in September-October.
- Reduce movement to and from infected areas as much as possible.
- Clean cultivating and seeding equipment likely to have soil stuck to it. A fire-fighting pump can be used and cleaning should be done on an area free of plant growth, or certainly free of ryegrass.
- Clean the underside of vehicles moving around the farm and between farms.
- Clean harvesting equipment to remove seed materials before shifting paddocks.
- Balers should be cleaned and all straw removed and destroyed before shifting the machine to an uninfected paddock.
- Cover loaded trucks to prevent possibly infective materials blowing on to road verges.
- When selling or moving vehicles or machinery from one property to another, hose off as much adhering material as possible, then steam clean.
- When transporting sheep in small vehicles, carefully destroy the bedding straw often supplied with purchased pedigree animals.
- Check woolly sheep to ensure that they do not introduce ryegrass seed.
- Ensure that contractors entering or leaving the property have clean equipment.
- Do not feed contaminated hay or grain.
- Avoid contamination of "clean" paddocks, for example by moving from clean to dirty paddocks when making firebreaks, or harvesting.
- Most stock losses have occurred on paddocks within 12 months of cropping. These paddocks should be watched most carefully.

Adapted from a Department of Agriculture Farmnote.