Weed control: cotton fireweed

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COTTON FIREWEED is a native perennial plant which has developed as a serious weed in the south coastal areas. It is not palatable to stock and responds readily to the application of superphosphate. Being a perennial it makes quick, active growth following summer rains and rapidly outgrows annual pasture plants.

Sheep do not like grazing amongst it and are hard to locate in a heavily infested paddock.

Chemical control measures are not satisfactory and the cost is too high over large areas.

Cultural treatments have proved effective but it is essential to follow a proper programme with care to obtain worthwhile results. It should be noted that cotton fireweed is readily killed by careful cultivation, preferably with a disc implement. The problem is therefore to overcome re-infestation of an area following the growing of a crop or cultivation.

The following programme is suggested for annual pastures:

1. In the late autumn, well before any likely opening rains, the area should be burnt. This overcomes the problem of implements becoming choked with the weed, and also induces new growth.

2. Several weeks after burning, the area should be cultivated with a disc plough. If the plants are not completely removed from the ground, regrowth may occur necessitating a further working. It is essential that this operation be undertaken before any germination of pasture plants has occurred.

3. If the area is not likely to produce a good subterranean clover pasture without reseeding, it should be sown dry with 6 to 8 lb. of seed per acre. The application of a reasonable dressing of super (at least 150 lb. per acre) is essential.

4. In this way a good pasture should be obtained and this is essential for the control of the weed. The area should not be stocked during the early part of the winter, but once the pasture has made good growth, say about the beginning of August, a heavy stocking rate should be used. By running six to eight sheep per acre on the area the soil will be compacted and with the added effect of the rain this will greatly reduce the likelihood of the weed seeds germinating.

Where cotton fireweed is growing among established perennials such as lucerne, this programme is not practical.

On the Esperance Downs Research Station, excellent control has been obtained by slashing and then maintaining a heavy stocking rate. The time of slashing is not important but it should be done during the summer or autumn. To avoid damage to the lucerne the paddock should be heavily grazed immediately before slashing.

Slashing alone has not proved effective where high stocking rates have not been maintained.