

Fleabane 101

ALEX MILNER-SMYTH

Flaxleaf fleabane (*Conyza bonariensis*) is the most common and problematic of the fleabane species in Australia.

It is a hardy weed, which spreads easily and is difficult to control, especially in minimum tillage systems.

Fleabane is rife throughout NSW and Queensland and is becoming prevalent in parts of SA.

Due to its difficult-to-manage nature, every grower should be on the look out for and know how to identify and control this persistent weed.

How is it recognised?

Flaxleaf fleabane can grow up to one metre tall and has deeply indented leaves, covered with fine hairs. The central stem is covered with stiff hairs, with branches stemming from the base of the plant.

What conditions does it thrive in?

Although hardy and adaptable to different conditions, fleabane flourishes and establishes large populations after dense rainfall. Fallow ground, cropping gaps and crops that do not compete well will allow this opportunistic weed to grow.

Cultivation can bury the seeds deep enough to prevent germination. No-till or zero-till systems allow fleabane seed to lie on the soil surface without the threat of being buried.

Fleabane germinates predominantly in spring and summer, but new plants can also emerge over winter.

Through the colder months, energy is concentrated on developing deep roots to access and store nutrients used for rapid growth in the following spring.

Fleabane is best managed when herbicides are applied to young plants in the juvenile rosette stage, so the combination of having plants at different growth stages as a result of different emergence times and the potential for rapid development when conditions are right can make it difficult to achieve good levels of control.

Control is difficult but achievable, with early action the key.



FLAXLEAF FLEABANE IS A HIGHLY COMPETITIVE WEED THAT FLOWERS PROLIFICALLY, WITH EACH PLANT CAPABLE OF PRODUCING 110,000 WIND-BORNE SEEDS. THE FINE HAIRS ON ITS LEAVES AND STEMS ARE ALSO CHARACTERISTIC.

How prevalent is it?

The following is a summary of flaxleaf populations by region based on information from Viterra agronomists.

AREA	STATUS
Eyre Peninsula	Minnipa, Kimba, Wudinna, Lock had relatively high populations in 2011, as did the area between Tumby Bay and Cowell.
Mid North	Overall levels increasing. High levels around Hallett / Mount Bryan / Booborowie
Lower North	Increasing in the higher rainfall areas along the range from Clare to Freeling. In the past two seasons spring and summer rains have increased populations but targeted spraying is slowing the spread.
Yorke Peninsula	Minimal reports of fleabane on lower YP; some in the central area. Summer spraying programs over the past few years have contained the weed.
South East	Moderate to slight problem, increasing. Slowly creeping further south from Keith – Padthaway – Naracoorte. Flood irrigation can increase growth over summer.
Mallee	Problem increasing.

Is fleabane spreading?

Yes. Fleabane is most definitely spreading. It is a prolific seed producer – a single plant can produce 110,000 air-borne seeds – and the seeds are easily spread long distances by wind.

It has historically been most apparent on the eastern seaboard but its robust nature combined with its small, easily-dispersed seeds means it is becoming more common in SA, with the good rains of recent seasons providing good conditions for it and accelerating its spread.



FLAXLEAF FLEABANE AT THE ROSETTE STAGE. SPRAYING YOUNG FLEABANE PLANTS GIVES THE BEST CHANCE OF ACHIEVING GOOD CONTROL.

Why is it becoming a problem in SA?

Fleabane typically starts off at very low densities so the farmer sees only scattered populations that appear of little concern. However, the number of seeds produced by each plant means populations can explode in the space of a season.

Early action is critical. To avoid the weed becoming a major concern, action should be taken to control it as soon as it is noticed, which is often during harvest.

Fleabane control is difficult but achievable, with early action the key.

Using spot spraying or a 'weed detector' system to spray out scattered, low-density populations while the plants are still in the rosette stage will stop the population developing and work out significantly cheaper in the long run than trying to tackle established, high-density populations.

Control requires robust rates of herbicides other than just glyphosate.

Fleabane is virtually impossible to spray in-crop and once harvest gets underway very few farmers have sufficient labour to spray paddocks immediately after reaping to control very early summer weeds. Consequently, fleabane is often well established by the time a farmer has the labour resources available to tackle it.

Summer sprays targeting weeds that are easily controlled with low rates of glyphosate do not control fleabane, which is able to survive these sprays and grow on

and set seed with minimal competition.

Fleabane appears to have increasing tolerance of glyphosate once it is past the juvenile stage, so control of this weed requires robust rates of herbicides other than just glyphosate, with a double knock strategy the most effective.

Many SA farmers can avoid the problems that have occurred in northern NSW and southern Queensland but they have to be vigilant now, while this weed is establishing itself across the State, and be prepared to take action as soon as they find even one or two plants in a paddock.

Want to know more?

- For more information on controlling fleabane view Barry Haskin's presentation to the 2012 SANTFA Conference. Available at www.santfa.com.au/media.php?TID=AV
- "Knock twice for reliable fleabane control", The Cutting Edge, November 2011 (Volume 8, Number 4)

Acknowledgements:

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- Barry Haskins from NSW DPI



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KEY MESSAGES:

- Know what fleabane looks like and take action to tackle it as soon as you see one plant. Ignoring small or juvenile populations is the big mistake in fleabane management.
- Go straight in with a double knock approach, with the second application 7-10 days after the first, no excuses!
- Spot spraying or use of a weed detection system works well and is cost-effective long-term.

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