BBOWT POSITION STATEMENT RAGWORT

Berkshire Buckinghamshire Oxfordshire

1 INTRODUCTION

Common Ragwort (Senecio jacobaea) is a native species of the Compositae (1) family found in many natural and semi-natural habitats. It supports many species of wildlife, including. Common Broomrape (Orobanche minor), 14 species of fungi and many different invertebrates, such as moth caterpillars, thrips, plant bugs, flies, beetles and mites. With the decline in flowering plant diversity in the countryside, ragwort has assumed an increasing importance as a source of food for generalist nectar feeding insects in the late summer. Ragwort is the food plant of at least 77 species of foliage eating insects, including five "Red Data Book" and eight "nationally scarce" species. The most well known is the cinnabar moth (Tyria jacobaeae). At least 30 species of insects are confined to ragworts, the great majority of which are confined to Common Ragwort or the closely related Hoary Ragwort (Senecio erucifolius). Many species of insects may be seen on ragwort flowers. Some use them as territory markers or as vantage points to find passing prey or mates. Some species prey on the other insect visitors to the flowers, some are more closely associated with the ragwort flowers, taking ragwort pollen, and more than 170 species have been recorded feeding on ragwort nectar. Such an important source of insects is exploited by birds and mammals."(2)

Ragwort is also poisonous to livestock, and is a particular problem for horses. It can cause a problem through direct grazing, but more normally problems occur where ragwort is dried, and is eaten in combination with other foodstuffs. Contamination of forage crops can therefore be a considerable concern.

2 LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Ragwort is specified as an injurious weed under the Weeds Act (1959). This act empowers the Secretary of State to require the removal of Ragwort from land where he/she is satisfied that there is a danger that it may spread. The Ragwort Control Act (2003) required the preparation of a code of practice on preventing the spread of ragwort, which was issued by Defra in 2004. Failure to follow the code is not a legal offence, but the authors of the code point out that following the recommendations of the codcode should provide a defence in the case of any legal dispute about ragwort.

3 THE CODE OF PRACTICE ON HOW TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF RAGWORT

The code recommends that landowners should assess whether or not action should be taken to prevent the spread of Ragwort based on the likelihood of it spreading onto land used for grazing or forage production. Essentially, the code recommends that removal be considered where land is within 100m of land used for grazing by horses and other animals or land used for feed/forage production. In relation to land of wildlife value, the code makes the following recommendation:

"**5.** Several species of ragwort and closely related species occur as native plants on many statutorily designated wildlife sites such as NNRs and SSSIs. Some species of ragwort are rare. Management of plant life is crucial to the ecology of NNRs and SSSIs and in such situations weed control, including the control of Common ragwort, may be potentially damaging to the nature conservation interests of the site. With regard to NNRs and other

(1) Now Asteraceae
(2)Code of Practice on How to Prevent the Spread of Ragwort – Defra 2004

SSSIs, English Nature must be consulted in advance of action and consent sought as to the most appropriate control method (Appendix 7)."

"**6.** On sites where grazing management is required and there is a wildlife interest associated with the ragwort then a risk assessment should be undertaken. If ragwort poisoning becomes a risk then grazing animals should be excluded from the areas for the period of risk, or the ragwort removed. However, the risk assessment may take into account the susceptibility of the particular grazing animals (species, breed, age, experience, foraging behaviour), the presence of abundant alternative palatable herbage and prevailing weather conditions."

"**7.** Where sites do not require grassland management for grazing, ragwort may be acceptable providing the presence of such ragwort is not a threat to horses and stock grazing land neighbouring the site, or adjoining land used for feed/forage production. The key factor will be the level of ragwort present relative to the risk of seeds spreading to land used for grazing and/or forage production."

"**8.** Emphasis should be placed on 'preventing' the establishment of ragwort by management, rather than 'controlling' populations of ragwort once they have occurred. Where control of the ragwort population is necessary, cultural control methods are the preferred option."

4 COMMON RAGWORT AND BBOWT RESERVES

Given the wildlife importance of ragwort, BBOWT will allow low levels of Ragwort to persist on our nature reserves. Before livestock are introduced to a nature reserve BBOWT reserve managers will assess the site to ensure that ragwort levels do not pose a threat to animal health. This assessment will take into account the type of stock involved. Due to the particular problem of ragwort in forage crops, BBOWT will manage land intended to produce a hay crop to ensure that ragwort is not present. This will normally be achieved through standard management practices (in particular, preventing excessive poaching / overgrazing). If a persistent ragwort problem is identified which will prevent the conservation management of a nature reserve, either by restricting grazing, or where a hay cut is the optimum management, ragwort will be removed. Control methods may, include hand-pulling, mechanical pulling, and if necessary chemical control.

5 OUR RESPONSIBILITIES TO NEIGHBOURING LAND

BBOWT will respond to any request from a neighbouring landowner to control ragwort on a nature reserve in accordance with Defra's code of practice to control the spread of ragwort. (See details in section 3 above).

6 OTHER SPECIES OF RAGWORT

There are a number of other species of ragwort which can also be toxic. These include the native marsh ragwort (Senecio aquaticus) and hoary ragwort (Senecio erucifolius), and the introduced hybrid Oxford ragwort (Senecio squalidus). Other native species are not generally considered to cause a problem to stock by virtue of their habitat preferences. Similarly, Oxford ragwort is associated generally with disturbed sites, such as wastelands or roadsides, and is unlikely to spread into grazing land. Oxford ragwort has been known to hybridise with a number of native species of ragwort, but is not considered to cause a significant conservation threat through hybridisation. It can, however, cause management problems through invading open habitats. BBOWT would consider the removal of Oxford ragwort on a case-by-case basis.

(1) Now Asteraceae
(2)Code of Practice on How to Prevent the Spread of Ragwort – Defra 2004

7 EXTENSIVE SPRAYING TO REMOVE RAGWORT

In the past extensive spraying has been used to remove ragwort from areas such as road-verge networks. We do not believe that such untargeted spraying is justified. The need for ragwort removal should be always be considered in-line with Defra's code of practice. Where removal is not required, as spread to grazing or fodder production land is not considered a High or Medium risk, ragwort should not be removed. Blanket spraying should never be used for ragwort control, due to the high risk of removing other species of conservation concern.

Last approved by the Board of Trustees in January 2013.

(1) Now Asteraceae
(2)Code of Practice on How to Prevent the Spread of Ragwort – Defra 2004