

# Weeds a pain in the budget for farmers

By LEIGH BOTTRELL

**W**HEN New Zealander Ben Minehan came to Goulburn, he saw and was conquered... by the vast areas of serrated tussock in the Southern Tablelands.

Which is why, when he returned a few days ago to his job as Marlborough District Council's Senior Bio-security Officer (Plants) he was moved to warn us to do more to get rid of it.

For good measure, Mr Minehan's first visit to Australia also opened his eyes to the proliferation of another highly destructive South American noxious weed in the region - Chilean needle grass.

Both these weeds have been established in NSW and Victoria for decades. They need constant control measures to keep their spread in check, and to save once-productive pastoral areas from complete degradation. Mr Minehan wrote to the *Post* (Jul 15, 2011) to say he was "astounded" when he saw the extent of the problem around Goulburn.

"We also have infestations of serrated tussock scattered across our region," he said. "But all infestations are controlled annually to prevent them seeding."

"Unless something changes in the Goulburn area, the serrated tussock infestation will continue to spread until pastoral farming becomes uneconomical."

Talking with Mr Minehan yesterday, he still sounded shocked by his Australian "Tussock Tour".

"Everyone in New Zealand should get to Goulburn to see what

a state we'll be in if we don't keep fighting serrated tussock, and Chilean needle grass, here in the South Island and some parts of the Northland."

Mr Minehan's patch includes the famed Marlborough wine and pastoral country in the Southland's north, which first saw serrated tussock in the 1950s. It's taken him and his six-man council serrated tussock eradication team (three full-time) 13 years to bring the weed under control.

Until now, New Zealand land-owners have been obliged by law to tackle serrated tussock and Chilean needle grass by seasonal "grubbing out" of individual plants.

Within a month, laws will change to allow farms to be regularly sprayed with flupropanate herbicide - a by-product of refrigerator gas - which has been available in Australia for years.

But the difference between New Zealand's determinedly stringent and successful fight to rid farmland of the Terrible Two weeds, and Australia's relatively feeble efforts, is law enforcement.

Mr Minehan said owners of infested land in New Zealand must grub out, or soon, spray these weeds every year. If they don't, the local council does the job and charges the landowner for it. And if the landowner defaults on payment, the debt is attached to the property title and recovered (with interest) as a first cost from the proceeds of its sale.

It seems to work. This year Mr Minehan's council went on to 19 farms to tackle the weeds. The year before, the total was 31.

Back in Australia, where Local Councils run noxious weed control programs under State departmental aegis, with widely varying degrees of enthusiasm and success, it basically comes

down to an honour system.

If you hit serrated tussock with flupropanate, or get stuck into a few early clumps with a hoe, you hope your neighbour(s) are equally farming community minded. Otherwise, seed storms from next door will see you doing the same old same old the following year, and year, and year...

Goulburn Mulwaree Council recently voted some extra dollars towards its weeds management budget. This could lead to a couple of people being assigned to weed control on a "term basis."

NSW/ACT now has a Serrated Tussock Co-ordinator, Clare Hamilton, based at Rylstone in the Central Tablelands, whose task is to learn which councils are doing what - if anything - and to help formulate a co-ordinated program to tackle the weed in earnest.

"The serrated tussock problem and its consequences are huge," she says.

"But everybody needs to be doing their bit - not just one or two in an area. It's an awareness and social challenge, as well as economic and environmental."

NSW/ACT has an estimated two million hectares of serrated tussock infested land - mostly tablelands.

The NSW coalition government included improved funding and tougher controls against noxious weeds in its pre-election platform, but so far nothing new has appeared from Macquarie Street.

As Stewart Thompson, Industry and Investment NSW's Goulburn regional agribusiness development manager, and long-time serrated tussock gadfly, told the *Post*: "if a boat spilt a bit of oil in Rose Bay, environmentalists would be all over it. Yet serrated tussock's an Exxon Valdez-size disaster and few people are aware of it."

## Ainsworth on the market

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The action is a blow for the well regarded engineer who secured significant rail, other manufacturing and fabrication contracts since branching out on his own last decade.

He had picked up United Group Rail employees when the business closed its Braidwood Rd workshops in June last year. It followed the Australian Rail Track Corporation's rejection of his offer to lease the work-

shops for 20 years.

In a business plan put forward for the lease, Mr Ainsworth predicted jobs for 20 more people.

"To support this level of employment we have sourced work to the value of \$60 million over the next five years in the rail industry, \$25m in the construction industry and we would normally receive between \$15m and \$17m in general public utility work outside these areas," the plan stated.

"This work would return directly to the Goulburn community in the form of wages at least \$24.6m over the next five years."

Having lost the bid to Chicago Freight Car Leasing Australia, Mr Ainsworth won council approval earlier this year to expand fabrication into the former wool scour building in Mazamet Rd.

Mr Smith told the *Post* another creditors meeting would be called soon.



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### Member positions

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Headlines