

Pest of the month

Nassella tussock (*Stipa trishotoma*) and **Chilean needle grass** (*Nassella neesiana*) are introduced grasses from Central and South America that have become major pest plants in parts of New Zealand. Both have the potential to spread through Tasman and Nelson's pastures.

Nassella tussock

Nassella tussock is difficult to control, unpalatable to stock and capable of invading pasture land. It is a prolific seeder (up to 120,000 per plant). The seeds remain viable for a long time in the ground and can be spread by wind, livestock, machinery and water. It was first identified as a pest on Canterbury farms in the 1940s and within a decade, it had forced some farmers off their farms.



Nassella tussock.

It is difficult to distinguish from other tussock grasses, but during flowering time (between October and December), its purple flowers and seeds make it easier to identify. It can grow rapidly up to 0.7 m in height and up to 1 m in width. The dense fibrous roots have closely-packed swollen leaf bases, similar to shallots. The leaves are narrow, wiry and rough to touch.

Nassella tussock is listed as a Progressive Control pest in the Regional Pest Management Strategy, requiring landowners to destroy all adult and juvenile plants. It can be found in Tasman and Nelson along the lower eastern hills, but it is capable of spreading well beyond this area. It is much more common in parts of Marlborough and there is concern about it being introduced in hay and mud or carried by machinery and vehicles. Vehicles and machinery working in Nassella areas should be cleaned before coming to Nelson or Tasman.

Chilean needle grass

Although Chilean needle grass is not known to be present in Tasman or Nelson, it is present in the Blind River area (5000 ha) of Marlborough and the seeds can be carried in hay and mud or by machinery and vehicles.

Chilean needle grass is also unpalatable to stock when seeding and it forms dense stands in pasture that rapidly reduce pasture productivity. However, its most destructive characteristic is the sharp seeds that can burrow through the skin of grazing animals and into the body muscles, causing abscesses and downgrading of the meat. It can also cause blindness in grazing lambs. It is known in South America as the "little dart". The sharp hairy seeds can easily be picked up and spread to new sites on animals, vehicles, and humans.



Chilean needle grass.

Plants grow to 1m high; the leaves are bright green and harsh to touch. The flowers have a purple tinge and ripen into hard sharp seeds with long twisting tails. The concern to our region is that machinery, stock and people moving between Marlborough and Nelson are potential pathways for this pest to arrive. Vehicles and machinery working in areas with Chilean needle grass should be cleaned before coming to Nelson or Tasman.

Council's biosecurity officers can assist with identification and advice on treatment, Ph 03 543 8400.