

# Pest Bulletin

## Toxic Weed Series



Horsetail

## HORSETAIL

A very common plant that most people recognize, horsetail is nevertheless a toxic weed. As with all toxic weeds, or any toxic substance for that matter, the degree of toxicity depends in some extent to availability. Like other toxic weeds, the mere existence of the weed in a field doesn't mean it is going to be eaten by livestock. After all, it is rough, has high silicate content and must be fairly unpalatable. But, if it is in hay in high enough amounts that animals cannot avoid, it will be toxic.

Although there are more than 15 species of horsetail to be found in BC, the major problem one is Field Horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*). It is a prehistoric perennial plant, and can be recognized by two plant forms: a "fertile" version with no leaves, about a foot high, light brown, with a spore-producing narrow cone at the top. The other version is "sterile", green, about two feet high, with whorls of stick-like leaves growing at the joints. The plants are found in patches, and likely every individual plant will be connected by one massive, creeping, tuber-bearing root system which can exist very deeply in the soil.

### Control

The root system makes horsetail very difficult to eradicate. When cut, the pieces will regenerate. Also, because of the nature of the foliage, it can be difficult to get herbicides to stick to the leaves, if one can call them that. Make sure to check registrations on labels before using chemical herbicides. These include Casoron (a granular product that is easy to apply), Amitrol-T and MCPA. Whereas Casoron and Amitrol-T have systemic activity and damage

horsetail roots, MCPA provides temporary control of just the foliage. Although applications of MCPA damage horsetail foliage and knock it down, the root system is untouched by this herbicide and the plants will grow back.

In conjunction with chemical control, it is best to take an integrated approach and use cultural control methods too. Since horsetail often likes poorly-drained areas, one can improve the drainage in combination with other controls. Overseed heavily with strong, mat-forming perennial grass species. Try to control horsetail prior to spore formation to help reduce the weed from spreading.

For more information please visit the BC Ministry of Agriculture, [www.gov.bc.ca/al/](http://www.gov.bc.ca/al/)

### References:

- *Toxicity of Equisetum to Horses*. OMAFRA. <http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/livestock/horses/facts/07-037.htm>
- *Field Guide to Noxious and Other Selected Weeds of BC*. BCMA, <http://www.agf.gov.bc.ca/cropprot/weedguid/horsetl.htm>
- *Crop Protection – Weed Control Factsheet: Horsetail (Equisetum)*. BCMA, June 1996. <http://www.agf.gov.bc.ca/cropprot/hrsetail.htm>

