



Whatcom Weeds

Whatcom County Noxious Weed Control Board 901 W. Smith Road Bellingham WA 98226
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FIELD HORSETAIL

Equisetum arvense

THREAT: Field, or common, horsetail is a native and widespread plant, occurring naturally through much of the temperate Northern Hemisphere. Horsetails are primitive plants, reproducing by spores and rhizomes. Since it is native, field horsetail is not considered a noxious weed in Washington. It can, however, be a troublesome plant due to its extensive, creeping rhizome system. Pieces of rhizome or tuber can easily be moved on equipment, spreading the plant to new locations. Field horsetail prefers moist sites but will also grow in dry sites. This plant is poisonous to livestock and can still cause poisoning when it is in hay.

DESCRIPTION: Field horsetail is a native, perennial, rhizomatous cryptogam, with two types of aboveground structures. The fertile stems, lacking chlorophyll, are pink to tan in color. These stems do not have branches and grow from 2 to 12 inches in height. Fertile stems usually appear in early spring before the sterile stems emerge. Spores, produced in large quantities, are borne in a cone-shaped structure at the tip of the fertile stem. Fertile stems and spores are only produced under certain conditions and most new plants develop from the rhizomes. The sterile stems are green, jointed and hollow, with whorls of slender, green branches, growing up to about 20 inches tall. The sterile stems emerge later in the spring and are the more familiar part of horsetail. These stems contain large amounts of silica, as do the related scouring rushes. Stems are killed by a hard frost and new stems emerge from the rhizomes in the spring. Horsetail has an extensive branched, creeping rhizome system. The rhizomes commonly grow to a depth of 5 feet, but have been found as deep as 20 feet and as long as 330 feet. Small tubers are produced along the rhizomes.

MANAGEMENT OPTIONS: As with all weeds, prevention is the best management tool. Once established, horsetail can be difficult to control due to its extensive rhizome system. Shallow or occasional cultivation will not control horsetail, and may spread the problem. Repeated deep cultivation may be effective in reducing the number of mature shoots. For small patches, consistent pulling of the sterile stems should control the plant to some extent. Field horsetail is resistant to many herbicides. Call the weed control board for site-specific chemical recommendations.

