

## NON-NATIVE PHRAGMITES (*Phragmites australis*)

### Problem Overview

*Phragmites australis*, also known as common reed or phragmites, is an invasive perennial grass that has spread rapidly throughout coastal and interior wetlands, riparian corridors, roadside ditches and other disturbed areas within the Great Lakes basin. There are varieties of phragmites native to the Great Lakes region, but these grow more slowly and less aggressively than the non-native strain thought to have originated in Europe. The European strain was probably transported to the Atlantic Seaboard of the United States through ballast material transported by ships at some point between the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Since introduction, the non-native strain of phragmites has spread pervasively through the Great Lakes region and other regions of the United States by both natural and human-driven dispersal mechanisms.



Phragmites is a warm season grass with hollow, rigid, woody stems and a vigorous root system consisting of horizontal underground stems called rhizomes. This extensive underground root system provides a means of dispersal of the plant, as the rhizomes can continue to support new growth when fragmented. Mature phragmites plants can produce up to 2,000 seeds annually, which are spread by wind and water, providing another significant mechanism for spread. In low water conditions, phragmites can also expand via horizontal above-ground stems, called stolons or “runners.” Non-native phragmites does not grow as aggressively in wetlands with established flora; however, tolerance to a range of water qualities and soil conditions such as those at disturbed sites has contributed to the rapid expansion of this invasive plant.

Due to its dense growth both above and below ground, phragmites can create mono-dominant stands 10-15 feet in height that effectively crowd and shade out native wetland and coastal species. As native assemblages are replaced by phragmites, species diversity is reduced and wildlife habitat quality is degraded. Dense phragmites stands can even alter the hydrologic regime of invaded wetlands by increasing evaporation and trapping sediment. Economic impacts of invasive phragmites infestations include reductions in property values and revenue loss from impacted recreational activities due to impeded access to coastal areas and restricted views. There is concern over the aesthetic impacts of phragmites when large stands alter views of lakes and wetlands. Public safety is also an issue, as large stands of phragmites near residential development represent a fire hazard. Considerable research has been conducted on the management of phragmites, but control practices are often expensive, long-term and complicated (see Management section).

**Photo:** 2008 Fact Sheet: Giant Reed, Plant Conservation Alliance, Alien Plant Working Group. <<http://www.nps.gov/plants/ALIEN/fact/phau1.htm>>  
Revision Date: 1/14/2008

### Identification

Non-native phragmites is a perennial grass that returns every year without re-seeding. The plant consists of hollow, tan, ribbed stems that can grow up to one inch in diameter. Phragmites can be recognized by its purple-brown seed head which develops into long feathery panicles (branched clusters of small flowers) by late July. The panicles can grow up to 8 inches in width and 6 to 20 inches in length. Phragmites has alternating leaves that are flat, stiff, and dark gray-green in color. The leaf span is 2 to 2.5 inches in width and 8 to 15 inches in length, tapering into a point at the end. Phragmites is supported by a deep rhizomous root system which can penetrate the soil between 1 to 6 feet and grow horizontally over 60 feet in length. The white to light yellow rootstalks can host up to 60 stems per square foot. In order to differentiate between native and non-native forms of phragmites, one must observe multiple characteristics including the ease of removal of leaf sheaths, density of stems, and stem color, texture, and flexibility, among others. Differentiation between native and non-native phragmites can be difficult; helpful resources are available from the Michigan Natural Features Inventory (<http://web4.msue.msu.edu/mnfi/phragmites/native-or-not.cfm>). In addition, a free diagnostic service is offered by Cornell University (<http://invasiveplants.net/diag/diagnostic.asp>).

**Size:** Phragmites can grow over 15 feet in height, forming dense stands and root masses.

**Native range:** Phragmites is found worldwide except for Antarctica and in every U.S. state except Alaska and Hawaii.

### Occurrences in the Great Lakes Basin

Peat cores suggest that native phragmites has been present in wetlands in North America for more than 3,000 years. Non-native phragmites likely arrived in the Great Lakes in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and is now found in every Great Lakes state as well as the provinces of Ontario and Quebec. The distribution of non-native phragmites in the Great Lakes is largely coastal, with inland infestations common in some states (see phragmites distribution maps for individual states on a county level at <http://plants.usda.gov/java/profile?symbol=PHAU7>).

**Means of Introduction:** Phragmites is believed to have arrived in the United States between the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, via peat and sediments in ship ballasts that were discharged into Atlantic coastal marshes. Vegetative spread of phragmites through rhizomes and stolons is a significant means of range expansion, often accelerated by human activities such as construction and transport of dredge materials; the species can also spread naturally through dispersal of seeds by wind, water, and animals. Rhizome fragments and seeds of phragmites can also be dispersed naturally by wave action. Phragmites has been intentionally introduced to some areas as a filter plant in water treatment lagoons and as a tool to stabilize shorelines in restoration projects. Growth of

phragmites is often facilitated by human disturbances, such as increased salinity due to runoff containing road salt, that allow it to out-compete native species.

**Status:** Non-native phragmites has become established throughout the United States; it is of particular concern in the Great Lakes region where over the last two decades it has rapidly spread through freshwater wetlands and coastal areas.

## Management

Due to the hardiness and extensive root system of phragmites, complete eradication is extremely difficult once the plant is established in an area. Furthermore, management and control techniques must account for cases in which there is a need to protect the native strain of phragmites in areas infested with non-native phragmites. Unlike the non-native strain, native phragmites populations provide many ecosystem benefits including bank stabilization and native bird habitat. Appropriate management plans should determine the type of phragmites strain prior to treatment and assess potentially undesirable consequences of removal, given the potential for presence of the native strain.

Phragmites eradication and control techniques currently in use are listed below. It is important to note that effective phragmites management plans typically require a combination of these methods over several years. Strategies will vary depending on the density of the phragmites stand and the characteristics of the invaded site. Most sites will require ongoing treatment on a long-term basis to prevent recolonization by this persistent invasive plant. The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) offers a helpful phragmites control and management guide for resource and land managers, summarized below and available at [http://www.michigan.gov/documents/deq/deq-ogf-ais-guide-PhragBook-Email\\_212418\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/deq/deq-ogf-ais-guide-PhragBook-Email_212418_7.pdf).

- **Chemical Control:** Herbicide application is usually recommended as the primary control method, and is often the first step in control programs. Glyphosate and imazapyr, both broad-spectrum herbicides, have proven effective at controlling phragmites.
- **Prescribed Fire:** Controlled burns are often implemented following herbicide treatments to remove phragmites biomass and promote resurgence of native species.
- **Mechanical Removal:** Mechanical removal, either by hand cutting or the use of equipment such as weed whips and small mowers, also serves to remove excess phragmites biomass and to promote growth of native plants. This type of removal is particularly useful when prescribed burning is not possible.
- **Water Level Management:** In sites where water levels can be controlled, such as impoundments, flooding is often used as a follow-up treatment to herbicide application and prescribed fire.

Landowners can find phragmites control information from the Michigan DEQ at [http://www.michigan.gov/documents/deq/deq-ogf-Guide-Phragmites\\_204659\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/deq/deq-ogf-Guide-Phragmites_204659_7.pdf). Additionally, a video has been developed on phragmites infestations on Beaver Island located in Peaine Township, Mich. outlining a useful ten-step management plan for newly established phragmites stands. Visit <http://www.agreatlakesjewel.org/phragmites/> to watch the video and learn more about the plan.

**Relevant Policy and Regulatory Issues:** Non-native phragmites is not listed as a noxious weed by any of the U.S. states or Canadian provinces in the Great Lakes region. Some Great Lakes jurisdictions (e.g., Michigan and Wisconsin) have listed phragmites as a restricted invasive species, regulating its possession and transport. For instance, in Michigan it is unlawful for a person to knowingly possess live phragmites unless there are plans to submit the specimen for identification, or if possession is in conjunction with lawful removal activities.

Most phragmites control activities require permits from state and/or federal agencies. For example, in Michigan a General Permit from the DEQ is required to mow or otherwise mechanically remove phragmites below the ordinary high water mark of the Great Lakes (the approximate location of the highest line on the shore established by water level fluctuations, as indicated by physical characteristics; see [http://www.lre.usace.army.mil/kd/go.cfm?destination=Page&page\\_id=1879&dialog=0](http://www.lre.usace.army.mil/kd/go.cfm?destination=Page&page_id=1879&dialog=0) for more information). A different permit is required to apply herbicides in standing water or below the ordinary high water mark of the Great Lakes. It is recommended that herbicides be applied by a licensed, certified applicator; for some herbicides this is mandatory. A permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is required for any phragmites control activities that affect Great Lakes coastal areas. (For more information on permitting in Michigan, see [http://www.michigan.gov/deq/0,1607,7-135-3313\\_3681\\_3710-178183--,00.html](http://www.michigan.gov/deq/0,1607,7-135-3313_3681_3710-178183--,00.html).)

Some jurisdictions have promulgated regulations on a local level to combat phragmites. For example, in Peaine Township, Mich., an ordinance was passed in 2008 allowing all phragmites-infested properties, including privately-owned properties, to be accessible to officials for inspection and treatment (see <http://www.beaverislandassociation.org/phragmites/>). A resolution passed in 2010 in Clay Township, Mich. establishes a support system for local landowners dealing with invasive phragmites on their properties (see <http://www.claytownship.org/Phragmites/>).

## References

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- Saltonstall, K. 2003. Genetic Variation among North American Populations of *Phragmites Australis*: Implications of Management. *Estuaries* 26: 444-451.
- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Detroit District. Ordinary High Water Mark and Low Water Datum. <[http://www.lre.usace.army.mil/\\_kd/go.cfm?destination=Page&pge\\_id=1879&dialog=0](http://www.lre.usace.army.mil/_kd/go.cfm?destination=Page&pge_id=1879&dialog=0)>
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- Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Chapter NR 40: Invasive Species Identification, Classification and Control. <<http://www.legis.state.wi.us/rsb/code/nr/nr040.pdf>>

## Studies, Assessments and Management Plans

### Phragmites: Common Reed

Cornell University, Ecology and Management of Invasive Plants Program

<http://invasiveplants.net/phragmites/Default.asp>

Researchers at Cornell University are investigating potential biological control methods for use in phragmites management. Their website also contains information on a free diagnostic service to assist in distinguishing between native and non-native phragmites.

### Common reed

In: Van Driesche, R., *et al.* 2002. Biological Control of Invasive Plants in the Eastern United States. USDA Forest Service Publication FHTET-2002-04.

<http://invasiveplants.net/monitor/9CommonReed.aspx>

This report summarizes research into natural insect enemies of phragmites and makes recommendations for future work.

### Control of Phragmites in a Michigan Great Lakes Marsh

Getsinger, K.D., L.S. Nelson, L.A.M. Glomski, E. Kafcas, J. Schafer, S. Kogge, and M. Nurse. 2007. U.S. Army Engineer Research and Development Center, Vicksburg, MS.

This report presents the results of small- and large-scale invasive phragmites treatment demonstrations, comparing and assessing outcomes from different treatment regimes and providing recommendations.

### Official Assessment of *Phragmites Australis* in Indiana's Natural Areas

Indiana Department of Natural Resources, Invasive Plant Species Assessment Work Group

Assessment Results: <http://www.in.gov/dnr/files/phragmitesresults.pdf>

Recommendations: <http://www.in.gov/dnr/files/phragmitesrecommendations.pdf>

This assessment analyzes different aspects of phragmites management in Indiana, including: invasion status, ecological impacts of invasion, potential for expansion, difficulty of management, and commercial value. Recommendations are provided to various government entities and stakeholder groups.

### Phragmites Control Plan

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

[http://www.fws.gov/bearriver/Phragmites\\_Control\\_Plan.pdf](http://www.fws.gov/bearriver/Phragmites_Control_Plan.pdf)

This document outlines a management plan for phragmites in the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge in Utah.

### A Guide to the Control and Management of Invasive Phragmites

Michigan Department of Natural Resources and Environment

[http://www.michigan.gov/documents/deq/deq-ogl-ais-guide-PhragBook-Email\\_212418\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/deq/deq-ogl-ais-guide-PhragBook-Email_212418_7.pdf)

This document provides phragmites management guidance to land and resources managers. It describes the methods of phragmites eradication and control currently in use, and suggests comprehensive management strategies for various management situations based on stand characteristics and site hydrology.

### Meeting the Challenge of Invasive Plants: A Framework for Action

Michigan DNR, Wildlife Division

<http://web4.msue.msu.edu/mnfi/education/InvasivesDNREStrategicPlan.pdf>

This document assesses the status of invasive plants in Michigan and outlines a strategy to address their negative impacts to wildlife. Strategic goals are described, creating a central framework of prevention, early detection and rapid response, and long-term control. Non-native phragmites is used for illustrative purposes throughout the document.

### Fighting Invasive Phragmites

The Beaver Island Association

<http://www.beaverislandassociation.org/phragmites/> and <http://www.agreatlakesjewel.org/phragmites/>

This website and video tell the story of a phragmites rapid response initiative on Beaver Island, Michigan, located in northern Lake Michigan. Local governments, landowners, and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) joined forces beginning in 2006

to eradicate phragmites populations on the island. Featured in the video is Peaine Township, one of two townships on the island, where an ordinance was passed allowing all phragmites-infested properties to be accessed for treatment. In the first year of treatment, the area of phragmites infestation on the island was reduced from 27 to only 3 acres. As of 2011, phragmites on Beaver Island is almost entirely eradicated and requires only moderate control efforts. This success can be attributed to rapid mobilization and response, cooperation of multiple stakeholder groups, and public outreach and education. The Beaver Island initiative can serve as a model for other local communities dealing with the early stages of phragmites invasion.

### **Clay Township Phragmites Management Plan**

Clay Township, St. Clair County, Michigan

<http://www.claytownship.org/phragmites/docs/PhragmitesManagementPlan.pdf>

This long-term management plan is an example of actions at the local government level to coordinate and improve management and control of invasive phragmites on private property.

## **U.S. and Canadian Federal Resources**

### **General Information on Phragmites**

Plant Conservation Alliance, Alien Plant Working Group

<http://www.nps.gov/plants/ALIEN/fact/phau1.htm>

This fact sheet includes an illustrated guide for distinguishing native and alien phragmites species

### **PLANTS Profile: *Phragmites australis* (common reed)**

United States Department of Agriculture-Natural Resources Conservation Service

<http://plants.usda.gov/java/profile?symbol=PHAU7>

### **Species Profile: Common reed**

U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Invasive Species Information Center

<http://www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/aquatics/commonreed.shtml>

### ***Phragmites australis***

USDA Forest Service, Fire Effects Information System

<http://www.fs.fed.us/database/feis/plants/graminoid/phraus/all.html>

### ***Phragmites australis* Article Citation Search**

USDA National Agricultural Library - AGRICOLA Database

[http://agricola.nal.usda.gov/cgi-](http://agricola.nal.usda.gov/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&CNT=20&CMD=%28%22Phragmites+australis%22%29+AND+%28inva?+OR+introduc?+OR+alien+OR+exotic+OR+weed?%29&STARTDB=AGRIB)

[bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&CNT=20&CMD=%28%22Phragmites+australis%22%29+AND+%28inva?+OR+introduc?+OR+alien+OR+exotic+OR+weed?%29&STARTDB=AGRIB](http://agricola.nal.usda.gov/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&CNT=20&CMD=%28%22Phragmites+australis%22%29+AND+%28inva?+OR+introduc?+OR+alien+OR+exotic+OR+weed?%29&STARTDB=AGRIB)

### **GRIN Taxonomy for Plants: *Phragmites australis***

USDA Agricultural Research Service, Beltsville Area - Germplasm Resources Information Network

[http://www.ars-grin.gov/cgi-bin/npgs/html/tax\\_search.pl?phragmites+australis](http://www.ars-grin.gov/cgi-bin/npgs/html/tax_search.pl?phragmites+australis)

### **Managing Invasive Plants: Concepts, Principles, and Practices**

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Wildlife Refuge System

<http://www.fws.gov/invasives/staffTrainingModule/index.html>

This training module for USFWS staff contains excellent information on formulating invasive plant management plans, the importance of assessments and monitoring in invasive plant management, and commonly-used management and control techniques.

### **Common reed, *Phragmites australis***

Environment Canada

<http://www.ec.gc.ca/stl/default.asp?lang=En&n=1ED761A5-1>

## **State and Provincial Resources**

### **Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*)**

Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant, Exotic Aquatics on the Move

<http://www.iisgcp.org/EXOTICSP/commonreed.htm>

### **Common/Giant Reed**

Indiana Department of Natural Resources

<http://www.in.gov/dnr/files/PHRAGMITES2.pdf>

### **Invasive Plant Species Fact Sheet: Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*)**

Indiana Department of Natural Resources, Invasive Plant Species Assessment Work Group

<http://www.in.gov/dnr/files/Phragmites.pdf>

## **Control and Management of Invasive Phragmites**

Michigan DEQ

[http://www.michigan.gov/deq/0,1607,7-135-3313\\_3677\\_8314-178183--,00.html](http://www.michigan.gov/deq/0,1607,7-135-3313_3677_8314-178183--,00.html)

**Phragmites (*Phragmites australis*)**

Michigan Invasive Species Information Network

<http://www.misin.msu.edu/facts/detail.php?id=33>

**Invasive Plants of Ohio: Common reed grass**

Ohio Department of Natural Resources

<http://www.dnr.state.oh.us/Portals/3/invasive/pdf/invasivefactsheet5.pdf>

**Common reed: *Phragmites australis***

Pennsylvania Dept. of Conservation and Natural Resources

[http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/forestry/invasivetutorial/common\\_reed.htm](http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/forestry/invasivetutorial/common_reed.htm)

**The Common Reed (*Phragmites Australis*): A Threat to Quebec's Wetlands?**

Report prepared for the Government of Quebec's Interministerial Committee on the Common Reed and for Ducks Unlimited Canada

[http://www.ducks.ca/fr/province/qc/nouvelle/pdf/phra\\_08e.pdf](http://www.ducks.ca/fr/province/qc/nouvelle/pdf/phra_08e.pdf)

***Phragmites australis* (Common reed grass)**

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Bureau of Watershed Management

<http://dnr.wi.gov/org/water/greatlakes/Phragmites2007.pdf>