

EMABRGO: 00:01 Tuesday 9 March 2010
Bug tackles UK's knotty problem

Wildlife Minister Huw Irranca-Davies gave the go-ahead today for the release of an insect, called a psyllid, to stop the spread of the non-native invasive plant Japanese Knotweed, a devastating plant which costs the UK economy over £150 million a year to control and clear.

Japanese Knotweed is listed by the World Conservation Union as one of the world's 100 worst invasive species. It grows vigorously at a rate of up to a metre a month, including through tarmac, concrete and drains, causing damage to roads and buildings costing the millions of pounds to remove each year. This deadly plant also damages our natural environment by stopping other plants from growing, and destroying habitats for native species.

Using an insect - which is a predator of the plant in Japan - to act as a natural form of pest control, will be the first time that a solution like this has been used to help control the spread of a non-native invasive plant in Europe and, if successful, could reduce the costs to the building and engineering industries of clearing this invasive plant.

Mr Irranca-Davies said:

“Japanese Knotweed causes over £150 million worth of damage and disruption throughout the UK every year. This project is not only ground-breaking, it offers real hope that we can redress the balance. These tiny insects, which naturally prey on Japanese Knotweed, will help free local authorities and industry from the huge cost of treating and killing this devastating plant.”

Chair of Environment and Sustainability expert panel at the Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) Ian Nicholson said:

“Japanese Knotweed is a big issue for the construction industry, costing millions of pounds each year to manage. The ICE therefore welcomes any advances in providing solutions to this invasive species, provided of course they do not produce any other negative impacts on the environment.”

CABI – a world expert in natural control methods – have carried out extensive research into the best way to combat Japanese Knotweed with the least impact on the environment. The psyllid was found on Knotweed growing wild in Japan and has now been tested in the UK on over 90 types plants, focussing on closely related native species as well as important crops and ornamental species to ensure it does not attack other plants. If the first phase is successful, the psyllid will be released at further sites where it will continue to be monitored.

Dr Dick Shaw, CABI's lead researcher on the project said:

“This is a great opportunity for the UK to benefit from a technique commonly used outside Europe. We have every reason to believe that this knotweed specialist can help limit the impacts of this harmful invasive weed safely and sustainably. “

Notes to editors

1. Japanese Knotweed was introduced in Britain by botanists in the nineteenth century as an ornamental plant.
2. The Latin name for the insect is *Aphalara itadori* .
3. The release of *Aphalara itadori* follows a public consultation held in July 2009.
4. The Japanese Knotweed Research Project Board consists of British Waterways, CABI, Cornwall Council, Defra, the Environment Agency, Network Rail, South West Regional Development Agency and Welsh Assembly Government.
5. Further information on the trials and control of Japanese Knotweed can be found at <http://www.cabi.org/japaneseknotweedalliance/>