

**FOREIGN LICE COULD HELP CONTROL INVASIVE WEED**

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Foreign "jumping plant lice" could be released in the UK to control the invasive Japanese knotweed, under plans being considered by the Government.

Officials are considering whether to grant a licence to release a non-native tiny sap-sucking insect to tackle the weed which causes millions of pounds of damage to buildings, roads and railways.

Japanese knotweed was introduced as an ornamental plant in the early 19th century and escaped into the countryside, where it is free of natural enemies.

As a result, the vigorous weed has caused major problems through rapid invasion of habitats and the exclusion of other plants, as well as eroding river banks and damaging structures.

The costs of a national eradication plan through conventional means was estimated at £1.56 billion in 2003, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) said.

Conventional schemes to rid the countryside of Japanese knotweed require treatment with herbicides, physical removal of plants and monitoring and further treatment to ensure it does not grow back.

In its native habitat, the plant is associated with 186 species of plant-feeding insects and mites - none of which are found here.

Five years of research by scientists at CABI has shown a species of psyllid, **Aphalara itadori**, is the best candidate to control the knotweed,

The psyllid has been tested on 87 other plants, including those closely related to the Japanese knotweed and important crops, to see if the bug would feed on them.

The research suggests the insect would potentially target only a few other closely-related non-native species of knotweed if it were released in the UK.

The scientists believe the introduction of the psyllid would not adversely affect native wildlife and could significantly reduce the costs of tackling Japanese knotweed.

Defra and the Welsh Assembly Government are considering licences to release the insect and ministers are seeking people's views on whether the scheme should go ahead.

A consultation was launched today, and closes on October 19.

