

African Feather Grass: Incursion Response Plan

Otago Regional Council

Introduction

Otago Regional Council (ORC) is responding to the detection of African feather grass (*Cenchrus macrourus*, also known as *Cenchrus caudatus*) at a single, localised site in Coastal North Otago: Wainakarua. This document provides an overview of what African feather grass is, why ORC is responding, what is currently known about the situation, how control will be managed, and how the public can help support biosecurity efforts.

What is African feather grass?

African feather grass is a perennial tussock-forming grass originally from southern and tropical Africa. It was introduced to New Zealand several decades ago, largely for ornamental use and erosion control. Since then, it has escaped cultivation and become naturalised in many parts of the country.

The plant grows in dense clumps and can reach up to two metres in height. It spreads primarily through underground stems (rhizomes) and also produces seed. The seeds have fine, barbed bristles that allow them to attach easily to clothing, footwear, animals, machinery, and soil. This makes accidental spread more likely, particularly where there is ground disturbance.

Once established, African feather grass can be persistent and difficult to remove. Dense infestations can displace other vegetation, reduce biodiversity, create fire hazards, block waterways, and interfere with land use and access.

Why ORC is responding

African feather grass is classified as an Exclusion pest in Otago under the Regional Pest Management Plan. This means the objective in Otago is to prevent the species from establishing in the region.

While African feather grass occurs in other parts of New Zealand under different management programmes, it is not considered established in Otago. Early detection and rapid response are critical to:

- preventing spread into surrounding landscapes
- avoiding long-term environmental and economic impacts
- reducing the cost and complexity of future management

ORC's response is part of its responsibility to protect Otago's natural, productive, and community environments through proactive biosecurity management.

Current situation

ORC has confirmed the presence of African feather grass at a small, localised site in Coastal North Otago in the wider Herbert area. Targeted surveys have shown that the infestation is contained, with no evidence of wider spread at this time.

Additional checks have been carried out in surrounding areas and at previously reported locations to increase confidence that the infestation is limited. These surveys have not identified further confirmed infestations.

How African feather grass spreads

Understanding how African feather grass spreads is important for managing risk:

- **Rhizome spread:** The primary means of spread is through underground stems. Any activity that disturbs soil can move rhizome fragments, which are capable of regrowth.
- **Seed spread:** While seedling establishment is considered less common than rhizome spread, the plant produces large quantities of seed. Seeds can be carried short distances by wind or water, and longer distances by people, animals, vehicles, tools, and machinery.

Because spread can occur through everyday activities, strict hygiene and access controls around infestation sites are essential.

What ORC is doing

ORC has implemented a structured response to manage this incursion safely and effectively. Key actions include:

Surveillance and assessment

- Delimiting surveys to confirm the extent of the infestation
- Ongoing monitoring to detect any new growth or spread
- Follow-up checks in surrounding areas to build confidence in containment

Containment measures

- Temporary fencing to prevent access to affected areas
- Clear biosecurity signage advising people to keep away
- Strict hygiene requirements for anyone authorised to access the site

Proposed response timeline

To help the community understand how this response is being managed, ORC has outlined the following **indicative timeline**. Timeframes may be adjusted depending on weather conditions and monitoring results.

- **Initial detection and assessment** – completed
ORC confirmed the presence of African feather grass and undertook initial surveys to understand the extent of the infestation.
- **Delimiting surveys** – completed
Targeted surveys confirmed the infestation is contained to a small area, with no evidence of wider spread.
- **Initial control (herbicide treatment)** – planned for **late April / early May 2026**
The first stage of control will involve spraying plants in place to prevent further growth and seed production.
- **Monthly Monitoring – May – Nov 2026**
Site will be regularly monitored for any regrowth.
- **Follow-up herbicide treatment** – Planned for **Nov-2026**
Additional treatments will be applied as needed.
- **Monthly Monitoring – Nov 2026 – March 2027**
Site will be regularly monitored for any rhizome regrowth and seedlings.
- **Site rehabilitation – March 2027**
Where appropriate, the site will be rehabilitated once plants are fully controlled, to help prevent re-establishment.
- **Long-term monitoring** – **April 2027 – May 2029**
Monitoring will continue to ensure any plants emerging from seed or underground stems are detected and treated.
- **Confirmation of eradication – June 2029**
Once monitoring confirms the area remains free of African feather grass over successive growing seasons, the site can be considered pest-free.

Control and eradication approach

Control will be carried out in stages and carefully managed to minimise biosecurity risk:

- Initial control will involve herbicide treatment (spraying) of plants in place, without disturbing soil.
- Follow-up herbicide treatments will be applied to ensure regrowth is addressed.

- Once plants are no longer active, limited earthworks may be used to remove remaining plant material and underground stems. Any such work will be carefully planned and managed to prevent the spread of plant material or soil.
- The site will be monitored over multiple growing seasons to confirm eradication.

This staged approach reduces the likelihood of spreading seed or underground plant material and supports long-term success.

Ongoing monitoring and proof of freedom

Eradicating invasive perennial grasses requires persistence and ongoing follow-up. Even after active plants are controlled, monitoring is needed to ensure no new plants emerge from seed or underground stems remaining in the soil.

ORC will carry out regular monitoring over at least two full growing seasons following the completion of primary control. Based on the current response timeframe, this means monitoring is expected to continue through to around mid-2029, provided no further regrowth is detected.

During this period, any new growth identified will be treated promptly. Once monitoring confirms there has been no regrowth over successive growing seasons, the site can be confirmed as free of African feather grass. Some low-level surveillance may continue beyond this point as a precaution.

What the public can do to help

The community plays a key role in successful biosecurity outcomes. You can help by being alert to unusual or unfamiliar grasses, especially those forming tall tussocks with narrow, feathery seed heads

If you believe you may have seen African feather grass, please report it to ORC:

Report at Pest website: <https://www.orc.govt.nz/environment/biosecurity-and-pests/report-pests/>

Phone: 0800 474 082

Email: customerservices@orc.govt.nz

Early reporting helps prevent the spread of pest plants and reduces long-term impacts.

A shared biosecurity responsibility

Biosecurity is a shared responsibility between councils, landowners, and the wider community. By following advice on signage, keeping out of control areas, cleaning gear, and reporting suspected pest species, everyone can help protect Otago's environment and landscapes.

ORC will continue to keep the public informed as appropriate while managing this response.