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## New test to weed out problem plants

A new test is being developed by researchers to identify plants that have the potential to become environmental weeds – a risk that could be on the increase as farmers search for new hardy, drought-tolerant pastures.

Weeds threaten native ecosystems, are an ongoing cost to farmers and make household garden maintenance hard work.

Unfortunately, persistent pastures have the same characteristics as weeds, so they must be identified when assessing their introduction to new environments.

Future Farm Industries CRC (FFI CRC) Researcher Dr Lynley Stone said up to now it's been hard to predict precisely what plant will become a weed.

"This new test, known as the *Weed Risk Assessment Protocol*, will make that task a lot easier by assessing and determining what plants are at greater risk of becoming a weed," Dr Stone said.

"For example, researchers when looking for new pasture plants can determine their weed potential fairly quickly and move on to other lower-risk species."

The test works by calculating a risk score derived from asking a series of questions about a plant's biology and ecology that looks at its invasiveness, potential environmental impacts and suitable growing conditions.

The protocol is based on a South Australian model that has been adapted to take on board specific FFI CRC considerations.

Most of the plants to be assessed using the protocol are already in Australia with the concern focused on their introduction to new areas or land uses. However, there are also a range of native species that show great promise as fodder plants and little is known about their weed potential.

"The term 'weed' is a non-scientific word for a plant in the 'wrong' place, so we are applying the test to find the worst potential offenders," Dr Stone said.

"That way, if a plant is identified as a suitable forage species and has a minor weed potential, we can start looking at how the risk can be managed.

"Other species with significant weed potential will not be introduced to new areas."

Once the test has been fine tuned, the CRC will release its weed risk assessment information to a wider audience, including farmers and natural resource managers, so they can make more informed decisions about the weed risk posed by certain plant species in their regions.

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