

Crews work hard to counter invasion of the prolific pampas

Kia'i Moku
By Joylynn Paman



Just after the sun peeks over Haleakalā, the Maui

Invasive Species Committee (MISC) field workers and partners gather their gear and review safety precautions. The crew has an arduous task ahead: scouring the southwestern slope of Haleakalā for the invasive pest pampas grass. The giant bunchgrass could be anywhere - clinging to steep gulch walls, overtaking open pasture, or capitalizing on the freshly turned soil eroded by wild goats.

The air is cold and crisp at the 9,000' elevation. Spaced 10 feet apart, the crew forms a sweep line wider than a football field and begins the descent. Loose rubble, uneven footing and the occasional impassable ravine make travel slow-going. By day's end the sweepers' bodies are worn and fatigued.

Looking back up at the 2,500' just surveyed, the crew enjoys the satisfaction of knowing their efforts have helped safeguard Maui's watersheds and native forests.

Far from its natural home in the Andean *pampa*, or grassland, South American pampas grass was brought to Hawai'i to decorate residential landscapes. The grass, which can tower beyond ten foot tall, quickly jumped the fence.

Each of its white, feathery plumes holds an average of 100,000 seeds. Seeds are swooped up by Maui's constant trade



This pampas grass was found growing in East Maui. In the inset photo, Maui Invasive Species Committee Field Supervisor Mike Ade prepares to remove a pampas flower plume.

winds and deposited up to twenty miles away. Seedlings can take root anywhere from coastal sand dunes to dense native rainforest.

Mature pampas plants create impenetrable masses of razor-sharp leaves. If a fire were to occur, dry pampas leaves would help fuel the blaze.

MISC field crews annually survey the island by land and air to stop pampas from spreading across ranchlands and native habitats. Once a flowering pampas has been found and removed, crews routinely check surrounding areas for emerging seedlings. Discovering hundreds of *keiki* pampas on nearby properties is common.

Wind-borne pampas seeds don't respect borders. Rogue plants have been found clinging to the cindery cliff walls of Haleakalā National Park, where they threaten to oust crater natives like 'āhinahina and kupa'oa.

Pampas often finds its way to places that can't be

reached on foot. Plants growing on steep West Maui Mountain ridges are located and controlled with the help of skilled helicopter pilots. Field crews are dropped by helicopter into remote areas, where they search under the tree canopy for plants invisible from the air.

To date, MISC has controlled nearly 15,000 pampas plants in residential and wilderness areas.

Two types of pampas grass have been recorded on Maui: *Cortaderia jubata* and *Cortaderia selloana*. *C. jubata* was added to the Hawai'i State Noxious Weed List in 1992. Recent research has shown that *C. selloana* is potentially more invasive than *C. jubata* and should also be added to the list. Both species have proven to be serious pests in California, Australia, and New Zealand - highlighting the need to eradicate populations here in our islands before they escape control.

You can help do your part. Call MISC if you see pampas grass growing on your property or in the wild. Allow MISC to control any pampas on your property. Never import or plant pampas grass. Don't purchase items that contain pampas seeds and/or flower plumes. Support legislation that prevents the introduction of new invasive species.

You can learn more by visiting www.mauisc.org or sign up for MISC's newsletter that features pampas grass in the Fall 2006 issue. E-mail miscpr@hawaii.edu or call 573-MISC (6472).

• "Kia'i Moku" (or "Guarding the Island") is prepared by the Maui Invasive Species Committee to provide information on protecting the island from invasive plants and animals that can threaten the island's environment, economy and quality of life. Joylynn Paman, is public relations and education specialist with the MISC.