

Do you have

TROPICAL

GRASS WEBWORM

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By mid-1999 tropical grass webworm had been found as far north as Te Pahi and as far south as Taupo Bay. To help understand how this pest could affect Northland in the future and to put a case for Government funding for research into control, the Northland Regional Council needs to know how widely it has spread across Northland.

If you think you have webworm on your property please contact your nearest Northland Regional Council office.

TROPICAL GRASS WEBWORM

Tropical grass webworm damage was first seen near Houhora in early March 1999. Apparently hard grazed patches quickly spread out, and during warm summer and autumn nights, five hectare paddocks were completely chewed out in 48 hours or even less. The larval, or caterpillar stage does the pasture damage. The adult or moth stage does not feed.

The tropical grass webworm (*Herpetogramma licarsisalis*) is found in tropical parts of Australia, Asia and some Pacific countries. It is a serious pest in Hawaii where natural control methods have been effectively introduced. It prefers kikuyu, but eats other grasses including paspalum, couch, oats, fescue, barley, perennial ryegrass, rye, wheat and bamboo as well as some weed species.

The webworm probably arrived in New Zealand naturally as a moth travelling on the trans-Tasman jet streams.

THE THREAT TO THE NORTHLAND ECONOMY

Given the rate at which it spread across the Aupouri Peninsula, the severity of the pasture damage, and the proportion of Northland with similar land form, soil, climate and pasture composition, the tropical grass webworm poses a serious threat to a large area of Northland.

The webworm has been previously recorded in New Zealand, but has failed to establish. Because it does not have a dormant stage in the winter, it must breed continuously throughout the year. All life stages are killed at temperatures below 5°C. It is likely that it will survive through the frost-free winters of the Aupouri Peninsula.



Tropical grass webworm damage looks like hard grazed patches on pasture.

HOW TO IDENTIFY TROPICAL GRASS WEBWORM

Webworm caterpillars are most numerous and hungry over late summer and autumn. If you have what appear to be hard grazed patches in an otherwise lush kikuyu-dominant pasture, you could have tropical grass webworm.

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The adult webworm is a drab fawn coloured moth, about 2.5 mm across, sometimes with dark spots scattered over its delta shaped wings. A generation, from egg to adult, takes about a month in summer. The female lays around 250 eggs which hatch into the greenish 'worms' or caterpillars which give the pest its name. The caterpillars live in pasture, feeding mainly at night or on cloudy days.

They can completely strip grass of green tissue, often leaving only peeled white fibrous stalks. By day the caterpillars shelter in silk tunnels which they spin in the grass. This silk webbing and abundant green fecal pellets are clear signs of webworm.

To check for webworm, scratch around in the base of the plants, just above ground level at the edges of the damaged patches of pasture. The caterpillars are 5 – 10 mm long and

very active when disturbed. They are translucent, and range from pale green to dark brown depending on what they are feeding on. Tan to dark brown pupae may also be visible. You can check for webworm by laying a sack on the ground at the edge of the suspect area. After a few days, lift up the sack. If webworms are present you will find pupae attached in webbing to the sack and live caterpillars on the grass under the sack.

OTHER PASTURE PESTS

Tropical grass webworms are often pale in colour and feed at night. If you have a large number of dark brown to black caterpillars feeding on pasture during daylight hours, you probably have army caterpillar. If in doubt, take a specimen to a Northland Regional Council office for positive identification.



Tropical grass webworm caterpillars are 5-10mm long and vary in colour from dark brown to pale green



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