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'The perfect weed': An old botanical nemesis refuses to be rounded up

By Tom Charlier

Posted August 9, 2009 at midnight

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HUGHES, Ark. -- At the seasoned age of 54, Willie Cutler figured he'd never be doing this again -- swinging a hoe to cut weeds in a field of waist-high cotton.

But one recent morning, as the sun crept above the treeline, mosquitoes and dragonflies hovered in the sticky air, Willie Cutler had a different task. He was weeding a field of cotton, a crop that has been hit hard by a new pest, the pigweed. The weed has invaded some 750,000 acres in the state, including about 250,000 acres of cotton. It has already cost growers some \$75 million in lost production, with the counties bordering the Mississippi River being hit the hardest. "You've got to do something to get some money," said Cutler, a Hughes native who has farmed trucks and farm equipment.

Reminiscent of the premechanized, preherbicide days when cotton was a labor-intensive operation, growers have resorted to hiring chopping crews. They're made up of laborers who generally are paid about \$7.50 an hour to manually cut the weeds. Burgess had been working since 6 a.m. with a chopping crew in fields outside of Hughes, Ark., using hoes to get rid of the weeds. Burgess had been working since 6 a.m. with a chopping crew in fields outside of Hughes, Ark., using hoes to get rid of the weeds. Burgess had been working since 6 a.m. with a chopping crew in fields outside of Hughes, Ark., using hoes to get rid of the weeds. Burgess had been working since 6 a.m. with a chopping crew in fields outside of Hughes, Ark., using hoes to get rid of the weeds.



It's so prevalent that cotton, soybeans and other plants have been genetically engineered to withstand it, all in vain. Pigweed has often been called the "perfect weed" because it is so resistant to the main herbicide on which farmers have relied for more than a decade. It's so prevalent that cotton, soybeans and other plants have been genetically engineered to withstand it, all in vain. Pigweed has often been called the "perfect weed" because it is so resistant to the main herbicide on which farmers have relied for more than a decade.

Kroger logo and a collage of images including a man in a suit and a group of people.

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"I think this threatens our way of farming more than anything I've seen in the 30-plus years I've worked in agriculture," said Ken Smith, weed scientist with the University of Arkansas' division of agriculture.

In fact, some officials draw parallels between the pigweed resistance problem and the effects of the boll weevil infestation of cotton fields in the early 20th century.

What makes the weed such a formidable threat is its rapid growth rate -- more than an inch per day -- and the proliferation that results from a single plant producing 50,000-100,000 seeds.

Rising up to 10 feet tall, with stalks as thick as baseball bats, the plant also can wreck any mechanical cotton-pickers sent into heavily infested fields. Since it outcompetes cotton for water and other resources, infestation easily can cut yields by 300 pounds per acre.

"If you wanted to draw up the perfect weed, this is it," said Larry Steckel, extension weed specialist with the University of Tennessee Extension Service.

Officials with Monsanto Co., maker of Roundup, acknowledge the resistance problem. They say it resulted from over-reliance on that one product since it became the herbicide of choice in the 1990s. The resistance has intensified as weed strains that survive the spraying reproduce.

"As you continue to use just that one single herbicide, you wind up selecting weeds that are a bit more tolerant. And as you do that year after year, you increase those populations until you have the resistance problem we've got," said Rick Cole, a Monsanto technology development manager specializing on weed resistance.

hired as many as 40 to 60 of the laborers. But even during a recession in which jobs Monsanto has been advising farmers to add other chemicals, especially pre-emergents and other "residual" herbicides, which form a chemical barrier in the soil, to their weed-fighting regimens.

"We're paying comfortably above the minimum wage, and still we have problems getting people," said Larry McClendon, a Marianna, Ark., farmer. Monsanto also has begun a test program that pays farmers up to \$12 an acre to treat crops with other chemicals, including those made by competitors, Cole said. He and others say the best workers often are the older residents who chopped cotton in their youth.

Steckel and many growers say if Roundup was overused it was because the chemical was so easy to apply and so widely effective. "You can tell the old hands -- they can go out there and work eight to 10 hours and never miss a beat," McClendon said. Roundup was a victim of its own success," Steckel said. "It was the perfect herbicide -- it controlled regardless of timing, with no crop injury."

Chopping cotton in a field outside Hughes, 40-year-old Arthur Powell said the work is good experience for younger people. His 14-year-old son, Freddrick, however, Steckel said he and other experts were "blindsided" by how quickly the resistance problem began this year.

"No, it ain't," he said, his clothes soaked with sweat. "It got a pretty good foothold last year in some fields, and this year it blew up into many fields," Steckel said. The crew of which the Powells are a part works from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. to avoid the day's worst heat. But by 8:30 a.m., the sun already is beating down with a vengeance, forcing an occasional water break. The changes wrought by the resistance problem can be seen in places such as Looney's Implement Co. in Hughes, which sells tractors, combines and pickers that can cost \$300,000 or more. "We do what we can," Arthur Powell said.

This year one of the hottest items in the store has been the \$25 garden hoe. As they turn to manual labor for this year's crop, farmers are wondering whether new herbicide strategies will work in the coming years. "We sell them as quick as we can get them," said clerk Don Arnold.

Some, however, are fatalistic about the prospects of chemicals ever controlling. The tools are being used by the growing ranks of choppers. Some growers have weeds for any extended period of time.

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"Mother Nature's going to win," said Wiener, the grower who farms in Crittenden and Mississippi counties. "There's going to be another (weed) down the road."

-- Tom Charlier: 529-2572

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August 9, 2009
4:52 a.m.

Turquoise writes:

"We're paying comfortably above the minimum wage, and still we have problems getting people," said Larry McClendon, a Marianna, Ark., farmer.
"They're made up of laborers who generally are paid about \$7.50 an hour to manually cut the weeds."

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The federal minimum wage became \$7.25 per hour effective July 24, 2009. That "comfortably above minimum wage"....adds up to a whopping \$2 a day/\$10 a week.

August 9, 2009
8:38 a.m.

usesomesence writes:

Wow...things never change do they?
in response to [Turquoise](#):

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nickadams writes:
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in response to [Turquoise](#):

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Wow...things never change do they?
We are paying \$8.50 per hour, come on up and get you some of it. You would not last 2 hours...things never change do they?

August 9, 2009
8:55 a.m.

There is a writes:

There is a reason someone is paid minimum wage- they are unskilled labor. Minimum wage is set by law so stop acting like farmers are committing a crime by paying it. It's a free market economy. If workers want and deserve more, they are free to go out and find it.
in response to [Turquoise](#):

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"We're paying comfortably above the minimum wage, and still we have problems getting people," said Larry McClendon, a Marianna, Ark., farmer.

August 9, 2009
7:49 a.m.

vwbugawrites:

"They're made up of laborers who generally are paid about \$7.50 an hour to manually cut the weeds."
in response to [nickadams](#):

[Suggest removal](#)

[Reply to this post](#)

There is a reason someone is paid minimum wage- they are unskilled labor. Minimum wage is set by law so stop acting like farmers are committing a crime by paying it. It's a free market economy. If workers want and deserve more, they are free to go out and find it.
Wow...things never change do they?

Well said!
It is probably you and your friends that complain prices are too high.....
What an idiot. Go take a class on economics!

August 9, 2009

Lucky writes:

9:02 a.m. in response to [nickadams](#):
Suggest removal
Reply to this post
There is a reason someone is paid minimum wage- they are unskilled labor. Minimum wage is set by law so stop acting like farmers are committing a crime by paying it. It's a free market economy. If workers want and deserve more, they are free to go out and find it

Well put Nick. If more folks would just figure that out maybe we wouldn't be on the verge of losing our free market economy in favor of marxism.

August 9, 2009 9:18 a.m. [tonyjack](#) writes:
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Reply to this post
\$7.50, \$8.50 per hour...I remember when all you got for picking cotton was \$3.00 per hundred lbs. back in the early '60's. But, it was either that or nothing. The reason why employers can't get workers is because able bodied people can just sit on the couch, get food stamps, subsidized housing, etc., and listen to Obama talk about spreading the wealth around. All this started with LBJ and his "great society" and the country has been in debt ever since.

August 9, 2009 9:50 a.m. [sidney4800#641884](#) writes:
Suggest removal
Reply to this post
in response to [tonyjack](#):
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People who fill the way you do should get their family members to cut the weeds. Pay them minimum wage and keep the money in the family. Problem solved!!!

August 9, 2009 11:05 a.m. [woodendoor](#) writes:
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Reply to this post
...and here I thought this story was about liberalizing / decriminalizing pot. Boy what a disappointment. Most of these farmers that are hiring workers are family farms where everyone is out there doing some sort of labor. I am only 23 and I have spent summers chopping weeds for various reasons, and I didn't get paid 7.50, 8.50 whatever an hour because it was a family farm. These farmers need to work out a deal with the unemployment agencies and round up some of the folks getting their checks and put them in the fields. They have no one to blame but themselves for being too lazy or feel they are "above" doing.

August 9, 2009 11:06 a.m. [MemphisCrimeFighter2008](#) writes:
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Reply to this post
People who fill the way you do should get their family members to cut the weeds. Pay them minimum wage and keep the money in the family. Problem solved!!!!
in response to [woodendoor](#):

August 9, 2009 11:18 a.m. [capnzoo](#) writes:
Suggest removal
Reply to this post
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August 9, 2009 12:27 p.m. [Snarky_Spice](#) writes:
Suggest removal
Reply to this post
I became especially joyus when they said they had found the "perfect weed" There's no doubt that everyone in the affected farmers' families are working as hard as they can, but the fact is that this weed problem is overwhelming and really interfering with the way they need additional affordable labor. It's not the word out that it's "weed" pigweed is such a feeling when you see it, you feel like you are great and then it's a weed, it's like you are a lazy farmer (heh heh) an increasingly difficult battle to stay in business and prevent America from relying on foreign countries for its food supply the way America already relies on foreign oil. When American farmers go out of business, your food and clothing prices will skyrocket. Farming is a pretty thankless job, and our farmers are really underappreciated.

August 9, 2009 3:04 p.m. [Magpiesmaster](#) writes:
Suggest removal
Reply to this post
I chop pigweed almost every day in our research plots, and wouldn't do it for \$8.50/hr. If you start at 6:00 am you get soaked by the dew. Mature pigweeds are the size of baseball bats and one 'cut' with a hoe won't take one out. We're not talking about chopping small weeds in small cotton. I'm a staunch right-winger, but don't begrudge anyone not taking this job--anyone who believes differently should try it sometime!
People who fill the way you do should get their family members to cut the weeds. Pay them minimum wage and keep the money in the family. Problem solved!!!!

August 9, 2009 3:56 p.m. [Lucky](#) writes:
Suggest removal
in response to [Snarky_Spice](#):
Just put the weed out that this "weed" will give a euphoric feeling when

Reply to this post
just put the word out that this weed will give a euphoric feeling when smoked,, your fiels will be cleared for free,, either by stoners,, or Bill Gibbons and Larry Godwin (photo op)

Now that's thinking outside the box. Great idea! I read it the other day and I'm beginning to believe in it ... missmya for mayor.

August 9, 2009 5:15 p.m.
Pied_Piper writes:

in response to **Maggiesmaster:**

Suggest removal

I chop pigweed almost every day in our research plots, and wouldn't do it for \$8.50/hr: If you start at 6:00 am you get soaked by the dew. Mature pigweeds are the size of baseball bats and one 'cut' with a hoe won't take one out. We're not talking about chopping small weeds in small cotton. I'm a staunch right-winger, but don't begrudge anyone not taking this job--anyone who believes differently should try it sometime!

Reply to this post

I have done it. I usually used a Joe-blade on the bigger stuff, but if you are unemployed and living off the taxpayers backs, it is a job, and one you can be proud of.

August 9, 2009 5:44 p.m.
Snarky_Spice writes:

in response to **Lucky:**

Suggest removal

Now that's thinking outside the box. Great idea! I read it the other day and I'm beginning to believe in it ... missmya for mayor.

Reply to this post

i no longer want the job,, the office isnt nearly as nice as i had hoped,, and they are gettin rid of the escalade (how else am i supposed to get to the plush)

August 9, 2009 7:07 p.m.
COMnSENSE writes:

THE perfect weed will always be POT.MAKE IT LEGAL and let anyone in jail for it,OUT.For their freedom and 7.50 hr., I'm sure they would gladly chop the weeds.ALSO.... every thing adapts over time STOP USING PESTICIDES.

Suggest removal

Reply to this post

August 9, 2009 7:56 p.m.
Don't Use Pesticides writes:
Don't use pesticides because they have chemicals. Check the back label of any house hold cleaning item under the sink and in many cases the chemicals in them are more harsh.

Suggest removal

By the way, when you're the job, check for use herbicide as i had hoped,, and they are gettin rid of the escalade (how else am i supposed to get to the plush)

Reply to this post

August 9, 2009 11:43 p.m.
atlas#2 writes:

I wouldn't do that work for \$15 an hour, \$20 -- maybe. If the farmers can't pay a just wage, I thought you might bite the bait and join the swelling ranks of living, family, saving wage, then let them go under. Let the weeds take over the fields. There is no longer a subservient class who'll kiss your arse and say "I'll keep my sons in the garage just in case you have a (Herenton moment) Thank you, Massa. I'd love to see one of you jokers out there chopping cotton on a 95 degree day. Ha! Whiny little babies sitting in your air conditioned offices worn out by having to lift a pencil. Go chop your own cotton, junior.

Suggest removal

Reply to this post

August 9, 2009 8:04 p.m.
Pied_Piper writes:

August 10, 2009 3:42 p.m.

fsilber writes:
in response to **COMnSENSE:**

Suggest removal

Well, at this juncture you may be POT.MAKE IT LEGAL and let anyone one opportunity if the crop want to sweat in the 7.50 hr! low pay they should listen carefully to the weeds and do their own thing adapts over time STOP USING PESTICIDES.

Suggest removal

Reply to this post

August 11, 2009 5:43 a.m.
1American writes:

Stop using pesticides. I can agree with using more natural alternatives (contrary to what some may say cotton farmers have been for years eg ladybugs etc), but to stop using pesticides altogether would send farming back to the stoneage. What a gonna do about it ---- TODAY

Suggest removal

Reply to this post

August 9, 2009 8:40 p.m.
nickadams writes:

August 11, 2009 1:26 p.m.

dan writes:
in response to **COMnSENSE:**

Suggest removal

I could be here but I think there is a better option. The Fed. Allman was for farmers in all forms of locally produced goods. I'm sure wage. So those bargaining the farmers don't lose... they are going to take the staff and 2) the use of pesticides competitive enough to get the help they desire.

Suggest removal

Reply to this post

Its a free market... I agree with other posters that the wage is still below what I would want to be out there chopping, so I'm not out there! There are those out there, so they must think the pay is at least reasonable... or else they would not

here, so they must think the pay is at least reasonable - or else they would not be out there either.

August 12, 2009 11:51 a.m.

ttstooge writes:

I applaud all of them who are doing it. I did it when I was a teenager... 50 cents a row - not \$7.50 an hour... and those were some pretty long rows. I think I worked out once that I was making about \$3 an hour... My dad and his parents drove to Yuma, AZ when he was young to do this so they could survive. I hear all this talk about how 'terrible' it is that some people are actually trying to work. How ridiculous. Let the economy tank again (and even worse next time around) and I'd be first in line to grab a hoe and chop a double row...

August 12, 2009 5:29 p.m.

lr1285 writes:

In response to "atlas" comment: "There is no longer a subservient class who'll kiss your arse and say "Thank you, Massa." I'd love to see one of you jokers out there chopping cotton on a 95 degree day. Ha! Whiny little babies sitting in your air conditioned offices worn out by having to lift a pencil. Go chop your own cotton, junior." I hate to tell you that chopping pigweed is not discriminatory. I am part of a farming family that has my "arse" & my wife's "arse" & my kids "arses" all out there chopping cotton right beside whoever we can scrape up & pay good money to do such a tough job. All while I get paid nothing until we harvest the crop. And to believe for a second that any of us our sitting in our air conditioned offices is completely absurd. The only air condition I find in my "office" is the breeze that blows through while I'm stuck under a piece of equipment with a hot welder making repairs. You guys don't have a clue what we farmers do in a day. Or how much it costs to put in a crop. Or what kind a risks we take putting every penny into a crop not knowing how it will turn out. Whiny, little babies, aye? You come follow me for a day (my typical "office" hours are from 5 am to 10 pm) and see who's whining by the end of the day. Bet it won't be me!

August 14, 2009 5:31 p.m.

bleedingblue writes:

I have worked on the family farm for years and years for free. I'm grown and have my own to worry about and still go work for free for my parents. They can't afford to pay for a hand to help drive the tractor/combine and help around the farm. As far as these people like sidney atlas go, I think the farmers should be paid 100% more. I don't think the country can grow enough food to feed itself and if these no it all's starve for a while and see how they like eating that pigweed for a snack. There are so many ungrateful people living in this country that have not a clue how they are able to stay alive is due to somebody else's hard work. I have never met a farmer who did not work side by side with his hands. I just really like these guys complaining about farmers with a full mouth and with clothes on their back.

Suggest removal

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