Cradle Coast NRM
CRADLE COAST AUTHORITY

UPDATE | JUNE 2022

Rubicon Rice Grass Project

Squeaking Point, Port Sorrell, Bakers Beach and Narawntapu National Park

Image: Aerial image of the Rubicon River

How far has Rice Grass spread in the Rubicon-Port Sorell Estuary?

Rice Grass (*Spartina anglica*) has invaded more than 660 hectares of intertidal habitat in the Rubicon-Port Sorell Estuary. Recent drone photography emphasises the extent of the infestation, and how quickly it has established following introduction 50-90 years ago.

This is the largest infestation in the Cradle Coast Region and the second largest in Australia after the Tamar.

Australian Government

This project is supported by Cradle Coast Authority, through funding from the Australian Government.

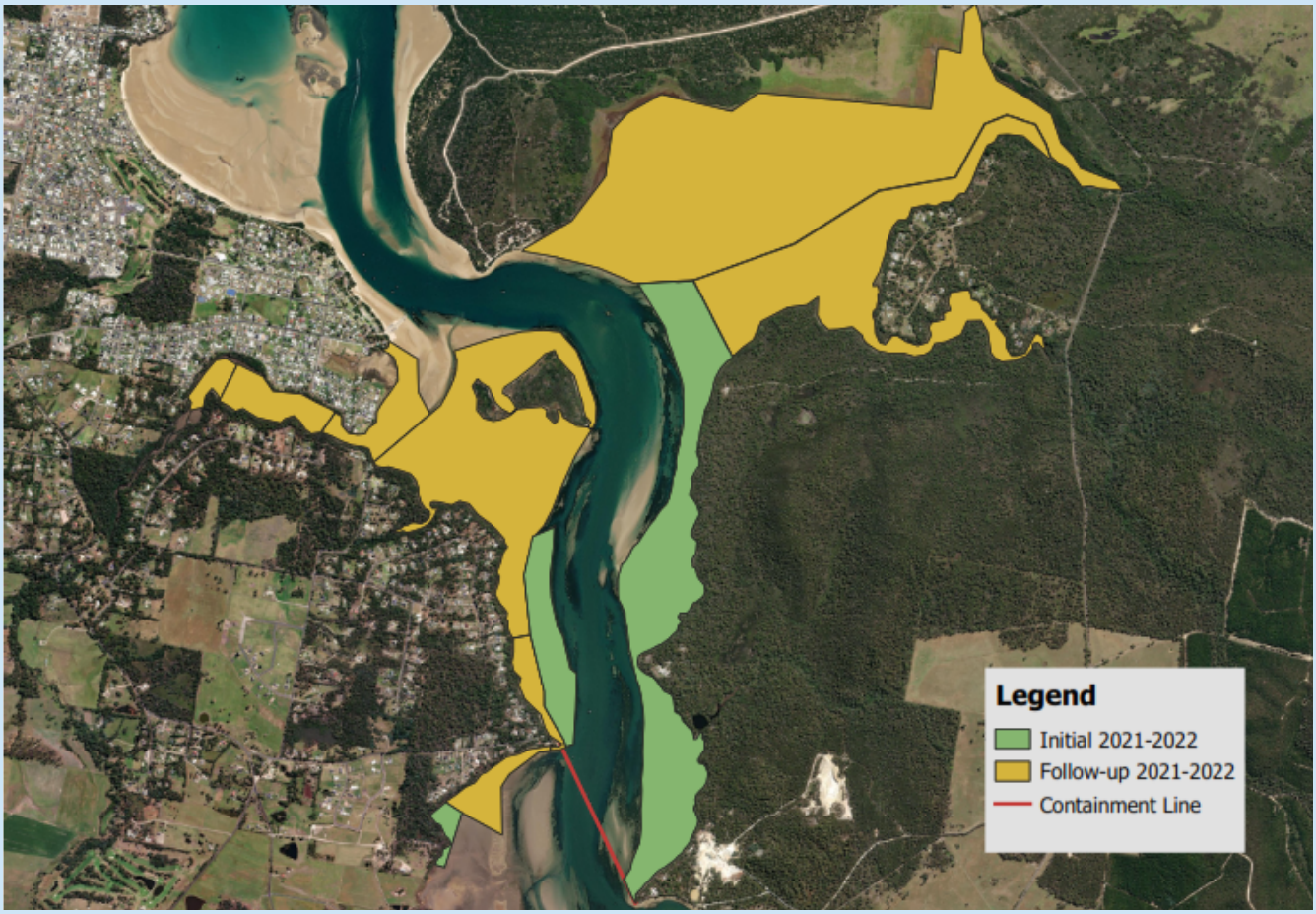
The current Rubicon Rice Grass project

Cradle Coast Authority (CCA), in partnership with Latrobe Council, secured funding to reduce the Rice Grass infestation in the Rubicon – Port Sorell Estuary.

The project is improving the condition and long-term protection of coastal saltmarsh and vast areas of wader bird feeding habitat. Rice Grass is being treated north of a “containment line” between Squeaking Point and Eagle Point to establish a Rice Grass Free Zone. Progress is also being made south of the containment line in the higher density infestations.

The current Rice Grass program will continue for one more season, ending in June 2023. Future funding for Rice Grass control is being actively sought.

Rubicon Estuary Rice Grass Control 2021/22



Rubicon Rice Grass project update

The weather allowed for an excellent treatment program this year (December-April), with very few days impacted by rain or wind. All follow-up areas were treated this year with the exception of a small area of Panatana Rivulet. This totalled ~435 hectares, exceeding our target of 405 hectares. Large areas were given an initial treatment this year, totalling ~119 hectares. Most of this was on the eastern bank of the Rubicon, extending from North-East Arm down to the containment line at Eagle Point.

Another ~20 hectares north of the containment line was completed at Squeaking Point as well as ~3 hectares of denser Rice Grass south of the containment line heading towards Thirlstane. All areas north of the containment line have now had at least one treatment (with the exception of a small area of Panatana Rivulet that is inaccessible by ground-based spraying).

This goes a long way to achieving our aim of establishing a Rice Grass Free Zone.

Aerial spraying

An aerial spraying permit application has been submitted by Biosecurity Tasmania to the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority. If the application is successful, Cradle Coast Authority will be permitted to engage contractors to undertake aerial spraying by plane, helicopter or drone. Further planning and consultation will take place later in the year based on the outcome of the application.

Seagrass

Seagrass beds grow underwater and provide important habitat for fish and invertebrates. Like saltmarsh, seagrass is at the base of the food chain, supporting the growth of thousands of tonnes of fish per year. Seagrass helps keep the water clean, assisting oyster growers and recreational fisheries.

It also has a very important role in stabilising sediment. There are five subtidal seagrass species in the Rubicon-Port Sorell Estuary and all are native.

Saltmarsh wetlands and seagrass beds, alongside coastal swamp forests, have recently been recognised as being significant carbon sinks. The sediments and plants of these ecosystems store carbon known as “blue carbon”. Work is currently underway to quantify, protect and enhance these carbon stores in Australia.

What are saltmarsh wetlands?

Saltmarsh wetlands are dynamic ecosystems and unique habitats where salt-tolerant plants such as succulents, herbs, grasses and low shrubs grow. These wetland areas are flooded regularly or occasionally; they are intertidal ecosystems which can include sand and mud-flats.

Saltmarsh provides habitat for many animals including crabs, snails, insects, spiders and fish. Along with primary producers (plants and algae), they all form an important part of the marine food web.

Saltmarsh wetlands support human use of the estuary and coast for recreational and commercial purposes such as fishing and tourism.

Migratory birds feeding in saltmarsh

In Tasmania, currently the most cost-effective and least environmentally damaging herbicide for Spartina control is Fusilade Forte. This herbicide does not affect native saltmarsh species or seagrasses, is rapidly absorbed by the plant and quickly degrades and has very low toxicity to estuarine fauna. Permits are required and restrictions on its use apply.

UTAS honours project

The large-scale removal of high-density Rice Grass infestations in the upper estuary is likely to result in movement of sediment that has accumulated beneath.

Researchers from the University of Tasmania (UTAS) have begun an honours project studying the geochemistry of the sediments beneath the Rice Grass infestations in the upper parts of the Rubicon Estuary.

The findings from this study will help evaluate risks associated with Rice Grass removal and inform potential next steps of the control program.

Image: Iona Flett (CCA NRM), Eva Knight and Clare Miller (UTAS) collecting sediment samples in the Rubicon Estuary

Coastal saltmarsh is listed as a Threatened Ecological Community under the Australian Government's *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (the EPBC Act).

How can the community get involved?

Boat-users and kayakers can wash down boats and equipment after entering Rice Grass areas to reduce the spread.

Get in touch

For more infomation and to get involved in the project:

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