



## ISSUE # 5: OUR CURRENT STATUS

We want to see the Ragwort Code of Practice effectively enforced on 70 miles of our local trunk road which is all managed for Highways England under the one contract. The contractor has just shared their 2017 ragwort risk assessment. It maps the ragwort clusters that they intend to address this year. As I make my initial assessment of the three by-passes (Charmouth, Dorchester and Tolpuddle) I find there is plenty to dispute. Some areas of ragwort that should be controlled, because they are close (under 50 metres) to vulnerable agricultural land are missing. In other cases, extensive ragwort is further from the land at risk, but it should be addressed to minimize the self-perpetuation of the hot spots we already have here. We will ask that the discrepancies are squeezed into their schedule of work. Maybe they will be, but if not, there will be Weeds Complaints raised via Natural England.

## THE FOCUS OF THE NEXT RAGWORT STRATEGY GROUP MEETING

When the RSG next meets towards the end of July, I will have to reaffirm that significant improvements in their procedures are required. They will need to justify the progress they are making with the three hot spot by-passes and any other areas identified as discrepancies. *They also have to explain why cutting extensive sections of flowering verge at the end of April and again in the middle of June was adopted at Charmouth.* This decimated the wild flowers and rightly caused an uproar among local residents and conservation bodies. I have already been advised that no participants beyond those present last time will be allowed to attend – they are expecting trouble..

## FURTHER AFIELD

I wondered if ragwort in profusion, as seen in these short sections of the A35, was typical for the Region. Well, sometimes it's worse elsewhere! The central reservation of the M5 has been pretty much overwhelmed with ragwort from Exeter to Taunton and the A303 has extensive patches at intervals (near Ilminster and near Ilchester, specifically). I have voiced the concerns of around a dozen Somerset farmers whose land is threatened by all this. Someone from Gloucester even popped up via the NFU - their M5 ragwort concerns were voiced, as well.

## WEEDS ACT ENFORCEMENT

The thought has occurred to me, that DEFRA and Natural England might just have consciously given up.

- Why has the DEFRA website stated for over a year now, that the Ragwort Code of Practice is withdrawn (when, if challenged, they say it's not withdrawn)?
- Why are there so few Weeds Act enforcements happening in a year (only 16 in 2016)??
- Why do Enforcement Notices that do happen take so long to resolve (less than a quarter of those raised in 2016 were resolved in the same year)???

As the season unfolds, through my MP, Sir Oliver Letwin and through the NFU, I will want to raise these and other questions with DEFRA, using whatever route appears to be the most effective. We'll need to ensure that the Ragwort Code of Practice is reinstated without reservations. In addition, we might well be asking DEFRA to rethink the procedures which have been developed for Weeds Act complaints. There are some, of course, who would prefer to see the Weeds Act left in limbo, indefinitely (ragwortfacts.com, Plantlife, Buglife etc).

If you share my concerns, now would be a good time to express them to your own MP. If you do this, please copy me so that we can tell Sir Oliver Letwin which other MPs have been sent a supportive message. He will need allies.

John Calder / 17<sup>th</sup> July, 2017