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Variation in susceptibility of giant buttercup (*Ranunculus acris* L. subsp. *acris*) populations to herbicides

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ABSTRACT

Giant buttercup (*Ranunculus acris* L.) is a serious weed of dairy pastures throughout New Zealand causing substantial economic losses from lost pasture productivity. It has developed resistance to the phenoxy herbicides (MCPA and MCPB) at many sites around New Zealand, particularly in Golden Bay. Since the discovery of resistance in the 1980s, two newer herbicides from a different mode-of-action group (acetolactate synthase inhibitor, ALS), flumetsulam and thifensulfuron-methyl, have been used widely, which appeared to overcome the resistance problem. A survey of farmers in Golden Bay indicated that most have herbicide control programmes for giant buttercup based around flumetsulam but some have reported poor control with this herbicide, particularly after several years of use. The research in this thesis was undertaken to determine whether this may be due to evolved resistance.

Seedling progeny from 15 populations of giant buttercup, with known spraying history, were sprayed with a range of doses of flumetsulam, thifensulfuron-methyl and MCPA (Experiment 1) to test for differences in susceptibility. The experiment revealed a large difference in susceptibility between the populations (83-100% and 58-100% mortality at the recommended rate and 2.2 times that rate of flumetsulam applied, respectively). The population with the highest past exposure to flumetsulam showed the lowest mortality and 25% of plants in this population survived a treatment with 5 times the recommended rate. There was a significant declining trend between percent mortality and historical exposure of these populations to flumetsulam. However, most populations with low previous exposure had no or few resistant individuals and only a few populations with high previous exposure had several resistant individuals present, as indicated by their survival above recommended rates. Calculated LD$_{50}$ values did not correlate well to the survival data or to historical exposure to flumetsulam, because the herbicide rates chosen in this experiment were too high.

Measurements of the biomass of giant buttercup, obtained several times after spraying in Experiment 1, showed some evidence of cross resistance to thifensulfuron-methyl but not to MCPA. Biomass yields 3 months after treatment were 1, 2 and 22% of untreated for the recommended rates of flumetsulam, MCPA and thifensulfuron respectively, indicating that flumetsulam and MCPA were equally effective, but that thifensulfuron-methyl was less effective.

In Experiment 2, plants from the most resistant and susceptible populations in Experiment 1, were grown from spare seeds and treated with a wider range of doses (including lower doses) of flumetsulam than in Experiment 1. The LD$_{50}$ values for the two populations in this second experiment differed 5.3-fold and this difference was highly significant. Twenty-nine percent of plants from the population with high past
exposure survived treatment with 25 times the recommended rate of flumetsulam compared to 0% from the population with no past exposure.

In a third experiment the same three herbicides and rates were compared for their damage to perennial ryegrass (*Lolium perenne*) and white clover (*Trifolium repens*) sown either in pots (Exp. 3a), or transplanted from the field (Exp. 3b). The total clover yield harvested over 5 months from newly-sown pasture was 80, 59 and 4% that of the untreated control for flumetsulam, thifensulfuron-methyl and MCPA applied at recommended rates, and 95, 40 and 30% respectively for transplanted swards. The total yield of grass was not reduced by any of the herbicides. Overall flumetsulam was the least pasture-damaging herbicide, but rates could not be increased above recommended rates in order to deal with resistance because pasture damage occurred.

The experiments in this study indicate that resistance to flumetsulam may be evolving in giant buttercup in dairy pastures in Golden Bay, but more research is needed in field trials to confirm this. Furthermore, the results indicate that some populations may no longer be resistant to MCPA, but this also needs further study to confirm. Currently-available herbicides may not provide adequate control of giant buttercup in the future if existing management practices continue.

KEYWORDS: *Ranunculus acris*; giant buttercup; MCPA; flumetsulam; thifensulfuron-methyl; efficacy; phenoxy herbicide; ALS inhibitor; resistance; Takaka; New Zealand; pasture tolerance.
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Table of contents

Abstract.................................................................................................................................................. ii
Acknowledgements.............................................................................................................................. iv
Table of contents................................................................................................................................. v
List of tables........................................................................................................................................ vii
List of figures......................................................................................................................................... ix
List of photographs............................................................................................................................... xi
List of appendices............................................................................................................................... xiii

Chapter One

Literature review.................................................................................................................................. 14

1.1 Giant buttercup *Ranunculus acris* L., subsp. *acris* ................................................................. 14
   1.1.1 Biology and ecology.................................................................................................................. 14
   1.1.2 Distribution............................................................................................................................... 15
   1.1.3 Toxicity...................................................................................................................................... 15
   1.1.4 Economic loss from giant buttercup in pastures................................................................. 16

1.2 Chemical control of giant buttercup......................................................................................... 17
   1.2.1 Modes of Action....................................................................................................................... 17
   1.2.2 Group O1 Synthetic auxins (MCPA and MCPB).................................................................. 20
   1.2.2 Group B ALS Inhibitors (flumetsulam and thifensulfuron)................................................. 21
   1.2.3 Effectiveness of herbicides used against giant buttercup...................................................... 21

1.3 Non-chemical control of giant buttercup............................................................................... 22
   1.3.1 Pasture management through grazing and mowing........................................................... 22
   1.3.2 Biocontrol............................................................................................................................... 23

1.4 Herbicide resistance..................................................................................................................... 23
   1.4.1 Definitions and methods for determining resistance......................................................... 24
   1.4.2 Discovery and occurrence of herbicide resistant weeds.................................................. 25
   1.4.3 Herbicide groups most affected by resistance................................................................. 26
   1.4.4 Factors influencing the development of resistance.......................................................... 28
   1.4.5 Resistance Mechanisms....................................................................................................... 30
   1.4.6 Evolution of resistance......................................................................................................... 31

1.5 Herbicide resistance in New Zealand weeds........................................................................... 33

1.6 Management of herbicide resistance...................................................................................... 36
   1.6.1 Herbicide resistance in giant buttercup............................................................................... 36
   1.6.2 Methods for delaying resistance......................................................................................... 37
   1.6.3 Decline in resistance over time............................................................................................. 38

1.7 Other causes of herbicide failure.............................................................................................. 39

1.8 Reasons for undertaking the study........................................................................................... 40
Chapter Two

Comparisons of the responses of giant buttercup populations to three herbicides .......................................................... 44

2.1 Introduction ......................................................................................................................................................... 44
2.2 Survey ................................................................................................................................................................. 46
  2.2.1 Methods .................................................................................................................................................. 46
  2.2.2 Results of the survey ............................................................................................................................. 46
2.3 Experiment 1 Comparing the dose responses of giant buttercup populations to flumetsulam, thifensulfuron-methyl and MCPA .......................................................... 47
  2.3.1 Methods for seed collection .................................................................................................................. 47
  2.3.2 Seed germination, seed planting and experimental design ................................................................. 50
  2.3.3 Spray application .................................................................................................................................. 53
  2.3.4 Assessment ........................................................................................................................................... 55
  2.3.5 Data analysis .......................................................................................................................................... 56
2.4 Results ............................................................................................................................................................... 57
  2.4.1 Biomass data ......................................................................................................................................... 57
  2.4.2 Mortality data ....................................................................................................................................... 62
2.5 Discussion .......................................................................................................................................................... 70
  2.5.1 Objectives 1 & 2 .................................................................................................................................. 70
  2.5.2 Objective 3 .......................................................................................................................................... 74

Chapter Three

Second comparison of susceptibility to flumetsulam of two giant buttercup populations – Experiment 2 ............................................................... 81

3.1 Introduction ....................................................................................................................................................... 81
3.2 Methods ............................................................................................................................................................ 81
  3.2.1 Seed germination and planting .............................................................................................................. 81
  3.2.2 Experimental design ............................................................................................................................. 82
  3.2.3 Assessments .......................................................................................................................................... 84
  3.2.4 Statistical analysis ................................................................................................................................ 84
3.3 Results .............................................................................................................................................................. 85
  3.3.1 Biomass ................................................................................................................................................. 85
  3.3.2 Mortality ............................................................................................................................................ 87
3.4 Discussion ......................................................................................................................................................... 89
Chapter Four

Effects of MCPA, flumetsulam and thifensulfuron-methyl on newly sown and established pasture swards – Experiment 3

4.1 Introduction

4.2 Methods

4.2.1 Experiment 3a New pasture

4.2.2 Experiment 3b Established pasture

4.2.3 Statistical analysis and design

4.3 Results

4.3.1 Experiment 3a New pasture

4.3.2 Experiment 3b Established pasture

4.4 Discussion

Chapter Five

Final Discussion and Conclusions

References

Appendices

List of Tables

Table 1.1 Cost of herbicides registered for giant buttercup control in New Zealand (based on prices (incl. GST) from PGG Wrightson, Sept. 2011)

Table 1.2 Herbicide mode-of-action groups based on the New Zealand system (NZCPR 2009)

Table 1.3 Herbicides with known activity against giant buttercup (Adapted from Bourdôt 2011)

Table 2.1 Results from survey of farmers about their herbicide use on giant buttercup

Table 2.2 Farm code, district and map coordinates (Latitude/Longitude, decimal degrees World Geodetic System 84) of the sites where seeds were collected for the study

Table 2.3 List of the 15 populations of giant buttercup used in Experiment 1 and their approximate number of treatments of flumetsulam, thifensulfuron and MCPA/B over the last 12 years (1997 – 2010)

Table 2.4 Dose-rate treatments for the herbicides used in Experiment 1 (five rates of each herbicide plus an untreated control)
Table 2.5 Rates for flumetsulam* (Preside™, Dow Agrosciences NZ Ltd) used in Experiment 1...............................53
Table 2.6 Rates for MCPA* (Maestro™ 750, Dow Agrosciences NZ Ltd) used in Experiment 1.................................54
Table 2.7 Rates for thifensulfuron-methyl* (Harmony®, Du Pont NZ Ltd) used in Experiment 1........................................54
Table 2.8 Percent mortality for the 15 populations of giant buttercup after treatment with each of five rates of flumetsulam.................................................................62
Table 2.9 Percent mortality for the 15 populations of giant buttercup after treatment with each of five rates of thifensulfuron-methyl.................................................................63
Table 2.10 Percent mortality for the 15 populations of giant buttercup after treatment with each of five rates of MCPA.................................................................64
Table 2.11 Percent mortality for the 15 populations of giant buttercup treated with flumetsulam, thifensulfuron-methyl or MCPA.................................................................65
Table 2.12 LD₅₀ values (g ai/ha for thifensulfuron and flumetsulam, kg ai/ha for MCPA) produced using GenStat parameter estimates for each population and herbicide as per equation 1 and 2.................................................................69

Table 3.1 Rates of flumetsulam applied in Experiment 2.....................................................................................83
Table 3.2 Percent mortality for populations of giant buttercup C and G, treated with nine rates of flumetsulam at 112 DAT.................................................................87
Table 4.1 Herbicide and dose rate treatments applied in Experiments 3a and 3b.........................................................97
Table 4.2 Dry weight (g/pot) of clover harvested from pots of newly-sown pasture (Experiment 3a) at 2, 3 and 5 months after spraying, and the total dry weight of clover produced over the three harvests.................................................................99
Table 4.3 Dry weight (g/pot) of grass harvested from pots of newly sown pasture (Experiment 3a) at 2, 3 and 5 months after spraying, and the total dry weight of grass produced over the three harvests.................................................................100
Table 4.4 Dry weight (g/pot) of ryegrass and white clover harvested from pots of newly sown pasture (Experiment 3a) at 2, 3 and 5 months after spraying, and the total dry weight of grass and clover produced over the 5 month period.................................................................102
Table 4.5 Dry weight (g/pot) of clover harvested from pots of established pasture (Experiment 3b) at 2, 3 and 5 months after spraying, and the total dry weight of clover produced over the three harvests.................................................................104
Table 4.6 Dry weight (g/pot) of grass harvested from pots of established pasture (Experiment 3b) at 2, 3 and 5 months after spraying, and the total dry weight of clover produced over the three harvests.................................................................105
Table 4.7 Total dry weight (g) of grass and clover harvested from pots of established pasture (Experiment 3b) at 2, 3 and 5 months after spraying, and the total dry weight of pasture produced over the 5 month period.................................................................108
List of Figures

**Figure 1.1** Number of resistant weed biotypes recorded worldwide from 1950 – 2010 (from Heap 2011)..........................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................26

**Figure 1.2** Number of resistant weed biotypes recorded worldwide from 1950 – 2010 based on mode-of-action group (from Heap 2011)................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................28

**Figure 2.1** Map of NZ showing location of sampling regions......................................................48

**Figure 2.2** Location of 14 sites in Golden Bay where seed was collected from and the one North Canterbury site (inset).............................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................49

**Figure 2.3** Diagrammatic layout Experiment 1: Split plot design, 4 blocks of 15 main plots (populations) plus 2 blocks of 11 main plots, 16 sub-plots (treatments) for each main plot........................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................52

**Figure 2.4** Min, max and mean monthly temperatures for 20\textsuperscript{th} August, to late November, recorded in the shadehouse throughout Experiment 1 ........................................................................................................................................................................................................................................55

**Figure 2.5** Reduction in biomass (relative to untreated plants) of 4-month old giant buttercup plants at 27, 59, 81 and 101 days after treatment with flumetsulam, thifensulfuron-methyl and MCPA applied at 5 rates. Data are the mean of 15 populations (82 pots per treatment)..............................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................58

**Figure 2.6** Reduction in biomass of giant buttercup plants (4 months old at time of treatment) at 27, 59, 81 and 101 days after treatment with flumetsulam, thifensulfuron-methyl and MCPA applied at five rates, correlated with past exposure to flumetsulam. ..................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................59

**Figure 2.7** Dose responses (biomass) of giant buttercup plants (4 months old at time of treatment) to flumetsulam, thifensulfuron-methyl and MCPA at 27, 59, 81 and 101 days after treatment. .............................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................61

**Figure 2.8** Percent mortality for 15 populations of giant buttercup treated with 5 rates of flumetsulam with fitted Probit curves. Populations B, Bh and R use only the bottom 3 rates to plot curve........................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................66

**Figure 2.9** Percent mortality for 15 populations of giant buttercup treated with 5 rates of thifensulfuron-methyl with fitted Probit curves........................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................67

**Figure 2.10** Percent mortality for 15 populations of giant buttercup at each of 5 rates of MCPA with fitted Probit curves. Populations R and Dp use only bottom 3 rates to calculate curve..................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................68

**Figure 2.11** Correlation of Log10LD\textsubscript{50}s for 15 populations of giant buttercup with increasing past exposure to flumetsulam........................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................70

**Figure 2.12** Correlation of percent mortality averaged over all five rates for 15 populations of giant buttercup with increasing past exposure to flumetsulam........................................70

**Figure 3.1** Diagrammatic illustration of layout of Experiment 2; a randomised block design with seven blocks, consisting of two populations with ten treatments (untreated control plus 9 rates of flumetsulam) randomly distributed within each block..............................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................82
Figure 3.2 Min, max and mean monthly temperatures for the experiment period (14th April, to 14th June), recorded in the shadehouse throughout Experiment 2.

Figure 3.3 Reduction in biomass over time for giant buttercup plants treated with flumetsulam (52 g ai/ha) for populations ‘G’ and ‘C’ in Experiment 2.

Figure 3.4 Reduction in biomass for giant buttercup plants treated with nine rates of flumetsulam at 21, 71, 95 and 112 DAT, for populations ‘G’ and ‘C’.

Figure 3.5 Change in biomass of the 12 plants (G population) that survived 11.2 and 25 times the recommended rate of flumetsulam.

Figure 3.6 Percent mortality for the two populations of giant buttercup (G and C) treated with nine rates of flumetsulam with fitted Probit curves. Parameter estimates for the curves were generated in Genstat.

Figure 4.1 Dose responses of 2-month old (a) white clover and (b) perennial rye grass to flumetsulam, thifensulfuron-methyl and MCPA in Experiment 3a. Dry weights are the sums of harvests at 2, 3 and 5 months after treatment as given in Tables 4.2 and 4.3 (last columns).

Figure 4.2 Dose responses of newly-sown pasture (grass and clover) to flumetsulam, thifensulfuron-methyl and MCPA in Experiment 3a, as given in Table 4.4, last column. Dry weights are the sums of harvests at 2, 3 and 5 months after treatment.

Figure 4.3 Dose responses of (a) white clover and (b) perennial ryegrass to flumetsulam, thifensulfuron-methyl and MCPA in Experiment 3b, for established pasture. Dry weights are the sums of harvests at 2, 3 and 5 months after treatment (from Table 4.7).

Figure 4.4 Dose responses of established pasture (grass and clover) to flumetsulam, thifensulfuron-methyl and MCPA in Experiment 3b, for established pasture. Dry weights are the sums of harvests at 2, 3 and 5 months after treatment (from Table 4.7).
List of Photographs

Plate 1.1 Close up of giant buttercup leaf showing deeply dissected leaf morphology (Photo by G.W. Bourdôt).................................................................................................................................41
Plate 1.2 Close up of giant buttercup flower (Photo by G.W. Bourdôt)..............................41
Plate 1.3 Clumps of giant buttercup plants in dairy pasture showing how grazing cattle avoid it and closely surrounding vegetation (Photo by G.A. Hurrell)..........................42
Plate 1.4 A typical dairy pasture in Takaka, Golden Bay, infested with giant buttercup (Photo by G.W. Bourdôt).................................................................................................................................42
Plate 1.5 A dairy pasture badly infested by giant buttercup in Takaka, Golden Bay, New Zealand (Photo by G. A. Hurrell).................................................................................................................................43
Plate 2.1 Tray of buttercup seedlings for one population growing in vermiculite soon after germination. Plants were pricked out and planted into pots of potting mix at this stage.................................................................................................................................75
Plate 2.2 Close up of giant buttercup seedlings soon after planting into pots (two seedlings per pot), growing in the glasshouse at Lincoln.................................................................................................................................75
Plate 2.3 Pots of giant buttercup seedlings soon after planting out in the glasshouse at Lincoln........................................................................................................................................................................................................76
Plate 2.4 Pots of young giant buttercup seedlings growing in the AgResearch Lincoln glasshouse prior to spraying (24th June 2010).................................................................................................................................76
Plate 2.5 Pots of giant buttercup 2 weeks after treatment with MCPA (9th Sept. 2010), showing typical phenoxy herbicide treatment symptoms of bending and twisting of stems........................................................................................................................................................................................................77
Plate 2.6 Two pots of giant buttercup 2 weeks after herbicide application (9th Sept. 2010). An untreated control plant is on the left while the plant on the right is treated with 5 times the recommended rate of MCPA. This photo shows the approximate size and developmental stage of buttercup plants at time of spraying....................................................................................................................................................................................................77
Plate 2.7 Pots of giant buttercup from one replicate from population ‘G’ 101 days after spraying (7th December 2010). This population had high past exposure to flumetsulam during the 12 years prior to the experiment (Table 2.2).................................................................................................................................78
Plate 2.8 Pots of giant buttercup from one replicate for population ‘C’, 101 days after spraying (7th December 2010). This population had not been exposed to any of the three herbicides (Table 3.2)........................................................................................................................................................................................................78
Plate 2.9 One replicate from each of population ‘G’ (top) and ‘C’ (bottom) treated with five rates of flumetsulam (increasing rate of 0.2-5 times recommended rate from left to right) 101 days after spraying (7th December 2010).................................................................................................................................79
Plate 2.10 Giant buttercup plant from population ‘P’ showing regrowth after spraying with 0.2 times the recommended rate of flumetsulam, 101 days after treatment (7th December 2010). The original foliage was completely destroyed before fresh regrowth occurred from the rhizome........................................................................................................................................................................................................79
Plate 2.11 Giant buttercup from population ‘C’ (top row) and ‘G’ (bottom row) treated with five rates of thifensulfuron-methyl (0.2-5 times recommended rates) with increasing rate from left to right and controls on far left (yellow tags) (7th December 2010)...

Plate 2.12 Giant buttercup from populations ‘G’ (top row) and ‘C’ (bottom row) treated with five rates of flumetsulam (0.2-5 times recommended rates) with increasing rate from left to right (7th December 2010)...

Plates 3.1a & b show two different replicates of pots of giant buttercup treated with nine rates of flumetsulam (0.04-25 times recommended rate) on 11th August 2010. Pots are arranged with increasing rate from left to right with population ‘G’ (bottom three rows, green tags) and population ‘C’ (top two rows, purple tags) and control on far left (yellow tags)...

Plates 3.1c & d show two different replicates of pots of giant buttercup treated with nine rates of flumetsulam (0.04-25 times recommended rate) on 11th August 2010. Pots are arranged with increasing rate from left to right with population ‘G’ (bottom three rows, green tags) and population ‘C’ (top two rows, purple tags) and control on far left (yellow tags)...

Plate 3.2 A healthy plant from population ‘G’ that has survived rate eight (581 g/ha; 11.2 times recommended rate) of flumetsulam, 101 days after treatment (11th August 2010). In this case the original foliage was only partially damaged before fresh regrowth occurred...

Plate 3.3 A giant buttercup plant from population ‘G’ that has survived 25 times the recommended rate of flumetsulam, 101 days after treatment (11th August 2010). The original foliage was almost completely destroyed before fresh regrowth occurred from the rhizome...

Plate 3.4 Two giant buttercup plants from population ‘G’, that have survived treatment with 11.2 (left) and 25 (right) times recommended rates of flumetsulam, 101 days after treatment (11th August 2010)...

Plate 4.1 Pasture cores taken from the Lincoln farm and planted into square pots for established pasture experiment, 24th June 2010...

Plate 4.2 One pot of newly sown pasture soon after treatment with 0.2 times the recommended application rate of MCPA. This photo indicates the approximate developmental stage of white clover plants at time of spraying...

Plates 4.3a, b & c These three photos show one replicate of five treatments (rates) of each herbicide, plus an untreated control, taken 2 months after treatment in ‘new’ pasture pots. Rates are arranged lowest to highest L-R (0.2-5 times recommended rates) with control on far left and from top to bottom flumetsulam, thifensulfuron-methyl and MCPA...
List of Appendices

1 Letter sent to farmers explaining project and questionnaire about past experience with herbicides for giant buttercup control

2 Plant and Food Lincoln Potting mix analysis used in experiments

3 Link to published paper on work presented in this thesis