Golden Sands
Resource Conservation
& Development Council, Inc.

Aquatic Invasive Species Quick Guide

Common Reed (*Phragmites australis* (Cav.) Trin. ex Steud.)

Description: Common reed, also called *Phragmites*, is a perennial, non-native grass that can grow up to 16 feet tall. Leaves are wide, dark green to blue-green, and up to 30 inches long. The base of the leaf narrows to a long sheath that tightly wraps around the stem. The leaf base has a short ligule (0.1 - 0.4mm). Leaves are dropped in winter but the sheaths remain attached to the stems. Stems are very strong, with distinct ridges. Large rhizomes quickly spread the plant locally, and may be seen creeping above ground as stolons. Seedheads are fluffy, often 8-12 inches tall, and are tan to purple.
A native subspecies also occurs in the U.S. and Canada. It has smooth, reddish stems, bright green leaves, and ligules 0.4—1.0mm long (see back side).

Common reed grows in dense patches and can tower over a person.

North American Distribution: Occurs throughout the continental United States and southern Canada.

Large, fluffy seedheads are present by late summer and persist into winter.

Dispersal Vectors: Stem and rhizome fragments can float to new locations and create new populations. Muskrats may transport stems for their shelters. Waterfowl hunters could move viable fragments for construction of hunting blinds. Seeds are dispersed by wind and water, but have low viability.

Ecological Impacts: Common reed can form very dense populations along streams and lakes, which often prevent access for humans and wildlife. They also shade out native vegetation, which leads to decreased diversity of plants and animals. *Phragmites* has displaced many large stands of coastal cordgrass (*Spartina*) populations, which are valuable for waterfowl. Abundant dead stems of *Phragmites* also increase the risk of marsh fires.

Control Options: Manual removal is difficult due to its extensive rhizome network. Combining bundling and cutting stems with painting herbicide on the cut stumps in fall can be effective on small sites. For large sites, cut stems in early summer and spray shorter re-growth stems in fall. Multiple applications will likely be needed. Herbicides must be labeled for aquatic use. Large stands of *Phragmites* along the Great Lakes shorelines and North American coastlines have been targeted with aerial herbicide applications.

Flooding can be used if the rhizomes are covered with several feet of water for at least four months. Draining can also be effective to reduce stand vigor.

No successful biological control agents are known at this time.

Phragmites has distinct ridges on its stems. The leaf sheath (shown at left) is tightly held.

Additional Information:
Global Invasive Species Database. *Phragmites australis*. http://www.issg.org/database/species/ecology.asp?fr=1&si=301
Great Lakes Phragmites Collaborative. http://www.GreatLakesPhragmites.net

Photo Credit: Paul Skawinski

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How can I tell the exotic *Phragmites* from the native *Phragmites*?

Exotic *Phragmites*

(*Phragmites australis* subsp. *australis*)

Leaf sheath tightly wrapped around stem

- Stem has distinct ridges and is tan-brown. Ridges can easily be felt with a fingernail.
- May have some irregular spots caused by mildew.
- Leaf sheaths stay attached to stems year-round.

Stems are often 12-15ft tall, with large, dense seedheads (early winter photo).

Native *Phragmites*

(*Phragmites australis* subsp. *americanus*)

- Stem is smooth (or with faint ridges), shiny, often reddish.
- Stem often has distinctly round, black spots.
- Leaf sheaths fall off stem during winter.

Stems usually less than 10ft tall, with sparse seedheads (early winter photo).

Photo credit: Paul Skawinski, Golden Sands RC&D