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Cooperative Research Centre for Sustainable Rice Production

... of growing importance

Media Release

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GOLDEN APPLE SNAILS... GOURMET FOOD GONE BAD

Now spread throughout most of the world's rice producing areas and as close as PNG the golden apple snail poses a major threat to the Australian rice industry.

Dr Mark Stevens(NSW DPI) says that its introduction to Australia would be catastrophic and he's calling for better training for agronomists, farmers and scientists to assist in the early recognition and control of any introduction. Dr Stevens, with the backing of the Rice CRC and RIRDC, works at the Yanco Agricultural Institute on a number of insect and invertebrate pests affecting the rice industry.

"The snail was originally introduced into Asia as a gourmet food. It failed to find a market and instead is now rated as the most serious animal threat after rats to Asian rice production. Even a moderate infestation will virtually destroy a transplanted crop within 30 days and it's probable that an even smaller number could wreak that sort of damage to our direct sown crops."

Difficult to tell from the 'mystery snails' now on sale in aquariums, the golden apple snail would be at home throughout much of the tropical and temperate areas of Australia. It could infest wetlands, destroying native vegetation, and is also an intermediary host to a number for serious human diseases.

"It's a pest we don't need in Australia," says Dr Stevens. Options for control are limited and expensive and we need to focus all of our efforts in keeping it out of the country. That's not as simple as it may sound because the positive identification of the snail is a difficult and highly skilled task. At present, identification focuses on small differences in the shape of the snail's shell when compared to similar species. There's a real need to develop the positive rapid identification system we'd need to deal with an infestation."

The golden apple snail severs seedlings just above the ground before eating stems and leaves. In Asia infestations of as few as 8 snails per square metre have caused a 98 percent reduction in tillers. Growing to about 1.5 cms in diameter and reaching sexual maturity in two months females can produce as many as 4,000 eggs during a two-year life span.

Egg masses are bright pink and the snail can exist out of water for long periods. While the rice industry would suffer the initial financial burden of any infestation golden apple snails will feed on plants as diverse as couch grass, sedge and lotus and represent a significant threat to our native wetlands.

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