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Kudzu leaving its mark in Florida

By **ROBERT P. KING** Cox News Service

Stan Stringer bounced his pickup along the gravel levee road, eyeing the straw-colored scrub for his prey.

"This is bugging me," he said. He'd found his quarry twice this morning but sensed he was missing something.

He slowed to 5 mph, sped back to 25. Then, somehow, he knew.

He stopped the truck and climbed down toward a canal lined with cattails. Bending over, he began tugging on a yellow-green vine with inch-long leaves. Ten feet of it came loose from the soil like a pulled thread.

It was kudzu -- known as the plant that ate the South, now nibbling at the fringes of the Everglades.

"I knew there had to be more," said Stringer, a technician for the South Florida Water Management District. He was here to kill it, or at least try.

These vines were small, but biologists fear they'll become a big threat if allowed to swarm through the Everglades. That's what kudzu has done in 18 states, where it has swallowed ditches, buildings and whole forests.

Experts once thought kudzu could never grow in subtropical South Florida. But in 1992, workers found it on the canal bank where Stringer was spraying, between the Sawgrass Expressway and an Everglades water conservation area.

Then scientists found it in Dade County, too. They say it's been there since at least 1969, perhaps planted by gardeners or state farming researchers.

It apparently hasn't sprouted in Palm Beach County -- yet.

Kudzu, once promoted by the federal government as a tool to fight erosion, kills trees and shrubs by shrouding them and blocking their light. It's hard to kill, can grow a foot a day and can send roots 12 feet into the ground.

A kudzu explosion is the last thing the Everglades need.

Sawgrass and other native plants already face an invasion of alien species, including hydrilla, Brazilian pepper and the water-guzzling melaleuca.

Skeptics say kudzu is suited to temperate climates -- and if it were going to strangle South Florida, it would have started already.

"I'm from Mississippi, and I can guarantee you -- if it were here and thriving, we'd know it," said Burkett Neely, manager of the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge in Palm Beach County.

"That plant just doesn't seem happy here," said Roger Hammer, a naturalist for the Metro-Dade parks department. Still, he calls kudzu "scary" and favors killing it.

Hammer worries about the seven Dade County kudzu sites, almost all privately owned and off-limits to government weed-killers. One is 1,000 feet from a preserve.

The district is taking no chances with the Broward site. Stringer spent two hours there Nov. 21, sprinkling a granular weedkiller on three growths.

The good news: All three were on the opposite side of the levee from the conservation area. A kudzu plant was once spotted on the Everglades side, but no one's seen it for three years, Stringer said.

The last search-and-destroy mission was about a year ago. After each try, the kudzu comes back smaller, said district vegetation management director Dan Thayer.

"We thought we killed it" last time, Stringer said. "I don't know what the end is going to be."

Santa Rosa passes ordinance aimed at controlling kudzu

MILTON (AP) -- What may be the nation's first ordinance aimed solely at limiting the spread of the fast-growing kudzu vine is on the books in Santa Rosa County.

Introduced from Asia in the late 19th century to control erosion, kudzu became virtually unstoppable as it marched across the

South, engulfing trees, power lines and anything else in its way.

Property owners can be fined \$50 for letting kudzu, which some folks call "cuss you," spread to a neighbor's land under a 4-1 vote by county commissioners Thursday.

"I don't know of any governmental agency that has regulated just kudzu," said Auburn University horticulturist Harry Amling.

Ordinance supporter Pat D'Asaro of nearby Bagdad drew some snickers from the crowd at the county courthouse when she untwisted a long vine of kudzu at the hearing before the vote.

But it was no laughing matter to many in the Florida Panhandle county. Henry Elliot of Pea Ridge asked for the new law after battling a kudzu-infested landfill for the past year.

"I feel a lot better because at least I have somebody to go to if the kudzu near my house continues to be a problem," Elliot said after passage.

"This will not mean 24-hour surveillance or squads of enforcement personnel, but rather some legal protection for residents in those rare cases of a neighbor's irresponsibility," he said

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