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WORTH THE RISK? INTRODUCTION OF LEGUMES CAN CAUSE MORE HARM THAN GOOD: AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Weeds are serious threats to Australia's primary production and biodiversity conservation. For example, a recent Australia Bureau of Statistics survey found that 47% of farmers across Australia have a significant weed problem. A literature review revealed that legumes represent a significant proportion of the national weed problem and most serious Australian legume weeds are exotic thicket-forming species that were deliberately introduced for their perceived beneficial properties, such as for shade and fodder, or even quite trivial reasons, such as garden ornamentals. The low economic value of the rangelands most of these

species infest, compared with control costs, hinders chemical and mechanical control of these weeds, such that biological control, which takes time, is expensive to implement and has no guarantee of success, may represent the only economically viable alternative to abandoning vast tracts of land. We argue that, because the behaviour of an introduced species in a novel environment is so hard to forecast, better predictive techniques should be developed prior to further introductions of plant species into novel environments. We also discuss the potential of legumes currently being promoted in Australia to become weeds and suggest the recent trend of exporting Australian *Acacia* spp. to semiarid regions of Africa risks history repeating itself and the development of new weed problems that mirror those posed by Australian *Acacia* spp. in southern Africa.

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