



Department  
for Environment  
Food & Rural Affairs

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**Your ref:**

**Our ref:** RFI 6889

**Date:** 9<sup>th</sup> October 2014

**REQUEST FOR INFORMATION: evidence, held by the department, that supports the assertion "Humans may be at risk from ragwort poisoning through direct contact (e.g. hand pulling)..." as stated in the Code of Practice on How to Prevent the Spread of Ragwort (2004).**

Thank you for your request for information that supports the assertion "Humans may be at risk from ragwort poisoning through direct contact (e.g. hand pulling)..." which we received on 11<sup>th</sup> August. I apologise for the delay in responding to your request. As referred to in my recent e-mail, it is not our usual practice to take longer than the time allowed for response in the relevant legislation and I am sorry that we have not been able to meet our usual standards. It has taken some time to ensure you have a full and accurate response to your request. We are also experiencing a high volume of information requests making it difficult to respond within the deadlines.

We are content to informally discuss any evidence issues in relation to this area of our responsibilities but the route of the enquiry means we are handling your request formally. After our initial response, as the subject relates to biodiversity and human health and safety, we have re-classified your enquiry as falling under the Environmental Information Regulations (EIRs) 2004, which provides public access to environmental information. The response also meets requirements of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

The EIRs apply to requests for environmental information, which is a broad category of information defined in regulation 2 of the EIRs. Public authorities are required to handle requests for environmental information under the EIRs. They give similar access rights to the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA).

Our response is split into two sections:

**A - recorded information** - that relating specifically to your question about the Code (in advance of the Code being finalised in 2004)

**B – additional information** subsequent to the publishing of the Code in 2004.



## **A – recorded information relating to development of the Code**

Evidence to support the Code goes back more than 10 years and we have reviewed the recorded basis for the content and present our findings below. The evidence we can find in the files that support the statement “Humans may be at risk from ragwort poisoning through direct contact (e.g. hand pulling)...” is stated below. The Code involved extensive consultation with a range of experts drawing on both published evidence and informed judgement. Comments, raised as part of the consultation with experts, highlighted uncertainty in the evidence but provided a range of opinion that was taken into account, these are provided below.

### **Three pieces of evidence from contributors towards the development of the code:**

1. *‘Code does not do enough to highlight dangers to human health from ragwort. Risks to humans come from human food chain (milk, meat, honey) and via inhalation of pollen and through skin. Risks and how to manage them need to be understood and communicated to the public. Where is research to back up claim that threat to human health in UK is ‘insignificant’.’*
2. *‘Ragwort poisoning is not a problem for humans in the UK, although there are some reports of contamination of staple foods, such as grain, milk, eggs and honey in Third World countries. However there is concern about risks to human health from hand pulling ragwort and we therefore always advise that suitably protective clothing is worn when pulling and handling ragwort.’*
3. *We have found no experimental data for any ragwort alkaloid. Physicochemical data (MW > 300 and poor water solubility) suggests limited potential for dermal absorption.... Overall, based on the very limited amount of information that is available, it would appear that if ragwort alkaloids came into contact with intact skin only a small percentage would actually penetrate the skin.... HSE are unaware of any reports either in the industry press or from HSE or Local Authority inspectors of any incidence of ill-health, caused by dermal exposure, amongst workers exposed to the plant. Our advice to workers who hand pull ragwort, or any other plant is to wear a sturdy and intact waterproof gardening glove and ensure forearms are covered.*

### **Draft Code contained several paragraphs on risks to human health on handling ragwort (paras 37, 166, 167 and 169), which stressed health and safety:**

*37 There is concern about the risk to human health associated with hand pulling of ragwort plants as a means of ragwort population control. It is not known if PAs can be absorbed through the skin, although anecdotal evidence indicates that they can. It is therefore advised that suitably protective gloves and trousers be worn when hand pulling and handling ragwort plants.’*

*166 Ragwort is a toxic plant and suitable precautions must be taken when handling live and dead plants.*

*167 When handling ragwort plants (fresh and dried) hands must be protected by wearing sturdy waterproof gardening type gloves and arms and legs covered to prevent ragwort plants coming into contact with the skin.*

169 *Suitable facemasks should be made available so that they may be worn to avoid the inhalation of ragwort pollen and to reduce the risk of hayfever.*'

**B – additional information and interpretation subsequent to the publishing of the Code (outside the scope of the request but contributing to the context)**

As a general principle, where there is uncertain or an absence of evidence, Government has an obligation to apply the precautionary principle to minimise risk in individual situations and circumstances. The use of the word 'may' highlights this approach and provides those using the Code with advice that takes full account of human health. A failure to raise the possibility of risks in the Code would not adhere to this precautionary principle, where care needs to be taken in order to prevent direct contact with ragwort while handling it and minimize/neutralise the risk of potential harmful effects.

We recently published a Defra commissioned review of evidence to support ragwort control options, which contained a section on human health risks. This section only includes references to incidents of intake of ragwort toxins by ingestion and not by touch/inhalation. The report *Review of evidence concerning ragwort impacts, ecology and control options* can be accessed on our website at this link <http://randd.defra.gov.uk>

If you would find it helpful to discuss any issue directly then please get in touch.

In keeping with the spirit and effect of the FOIA/EIR, and in keeping with the government's Transparency Agenda, all information is assumed to be releasable to the public unless exempt. Therefore, the information released to you will now be published on [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) together with any related information that will provide a key to its wider context. Please note that this will not include your personal data.

I attach Annex A, which explains the copyright that applies to the information being released to you.

I also attach Annex B giving contact details should you be unhappy with the service you have received.

The policy team are always open to discussing with you issues about the development of ragwort policy outside the scope of FOI/EIRs requests. Please contact ();

If you have any queries about this letter please contact the address below.

Defra FOIA and EIRs Team

[InformationRequests@defra.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:InformationRequests@defra.gsi.gov.uk)

## **Annex A**

### **Copyright**

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## **Annex B**

### **Complaints**

If you are unhappy with the service you have received in relation to your request you may make a complaint or appeal against our decision under section 17(7) of the FOIA or under regulation 18 of the EIRs, as applicable, within 40 working days of the date of this letter. Please write to Mike Kaye, Head of Information Standards, Area 4D, Nobel House, 17 Smith Square, London, SW1P 3JR (email: [requestforinfo@defra.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:requestforinfo@defra.gsi.gov.uk)) and he will arrange for an internal review of your case. Details of Defra's complaints procedure are on our [website](#).

If you are not content with the outcome of the internal review, section 50 of the FOIA and regulation 18 of the EIRs gives you the right to apply directly to the Information Commissioner for a decision. Please note that generally the Information Commissioner cannot make a decision unless you have first exhausted Defra's own complaints procedure. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at:

Information Commissioner's Office  
Wycliffe House  
Water Lane  
Wilmslow  
Cheshire  
SK9 5AF