

“B” Rated Weeds

A weed of economic importance which is regionally abundant,
but may have limited distribution in some counties

Medusahead rye

Taeniatherum caput-medusae

Other common names: Medusahead grass,
Medusa’s head, rough medusahead

USDA symbol: TACA8

ODA rating: B



Introduction: Medusahead rye is one of the most destructive grasses to invade North America. Native to the Mediterranean region of Eurasia it was introduced in the United States in the late 1800s attached to imported animals, or their bedding. It now dominates millions of acres of rangeland in the west. It is implemented in aiding the decline of sage grouse.

Distribution in Oregon: The first record of Medusahead rye in Oregon was recorded in 1887 in Douglas County. It has a wide distribution statewide; expanding rapidly in fire scarred areas and low moisture rangeland. It is adaptable, persisting in high moisture sites in Western Oregon also.

Description: Medusahead rye is a slender annual grass growing six to 18 inches tall. Seeds are housed in spikelets in a densely crowded bristly spike one to two inches long. Spikelets have tiny recurved barbs. Growth and seed production are early utilizing most surface moisture before native grasses begin their growth. Medusahead rye’s leaf blades are somewhat rolled, 1/16” wide. It is usually found in clay soils and has a shallow root system.

Impacts: Found in virtually every county, Medusahead rye demonstrates its negative qualities best on the east side of Oregon where it out-competes other grasses by extracting the majority of moisture well before perennial grasses have begun to grow. Medusahead is rich in silica becoming unpalatable in late spring as livestock forage. Once the grass dominates an area, the land base becomes unable to support wildlife or livestock. The stiff awns and hard florets injure eyes and mouths of grazing animals. Medusahead rye changes the moisture dynamics of the soil, greatly reducing seed germination of other species, and creating flash fuel for wildfires.

Biological controls: No approved biological control agents are currently available, although two seed attacking fungal smut diseases are being researched.

