

# **Morphological and molecular characterisation of *Echinochloa* species in the northern grain region of Australia and implications for weed management**

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A thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
of the University of New England  
Armidale, Australia.

June 2010

## Abstract

Barnyard grasses (*Echinochloa* species) occur as major summer weeds in farming systems of the northern grain region (NGR) of Australia. Farmers report difficulty in achieving effective control of *Echinochloa* using current management practices, with varied levels of success being reported. This study was undertaken to identify what species were present in the farming systems of the NGR, and to investigate if the varied levels of control could be attributed to morphological variations and/or the genetic diversity present within populations. It is important to identify correctly the *Echinochloa* species present in order to achieve better control and reduce the current threat of glyphosate resistance evolution in these weeds in the NGR.

This study commenced at the end of 2004 with field surveys being undertaken at three major cropping centres of the NGR; Wowan (central Queensland), Dalby (southern Queensland) and Narrabri (northern New South Wales). Two species were identified as occurring in the NGR, *Echinochloa colona* (L.) Link and *Echinochloa crus-galli* (L.) Beauv.. *Echinochloa colona* was the most widespread species accounting for 93 percent of the plants sampled. Both species were morphologically diverse across the region with *E. colona* categorised into 20 growth categories and *E. crus-galli* into six categories. The most common growth form in *E. colona* was semi-erect to prostrate (50%) while the majority of *E. crus-galli* plants were erect (84%).

With regard to genetic diversity, more polymorphism was evident in *E. colona* than in *E. crus-galli*, and the *E. colona* polymorphisms related largely to regional collection centres. Of the five microsatellites or simple sequence repeats (SSRs) used to detect genetic diversity, three were able to clearly distinguish between the two species. Intra-species variation was evident in *E. colona* with two SSRs proving informative while only one SSR was able to detect a minor variation in *E. crus-galli*.

A dose-mortality experiment was conducted as a pot trial to determine the level of control of both species to four rates of glyphosate, and if the responses were related to regional centres or populations. Three days after the treatments were applied, 82 percent of the *E. crus-galli* plants treated with the recommended rate had some degree of visual damage compared to 51 percent of the *E. colona* plants. At 14 days after

treatment (DAT), control of both species was achieved with all plants sprayed with the recommended rate dying. However, treatments applied at the lower rates did not provide total control of either species.

There were no clear relationships between the observed genetic groupings of *E. colona* or *E. crus-galli* and their observed morphology or response to glyphosate.

The results of this study show that genetics and morphology cannot be reliably used to develop a weed management plan, due to the diversity found in both characteristics and no clear connection with herbicide susceptibility. However, molecular techniques can be used to clearly distinguish between *E. colona* and *E. crus-galli* and morphology can be used to distinguish between the mature plants of both species.

## **Declaration**

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been  
submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used,  
have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Michelle D. Keenan

## **Acknowledgements**

There are so many people I have to thank for their continued support and persistent belief that I could finish this project.

Firstly I want to acknowledge and thank the Co-operative Research Centre for Australian Weed Management and the University of New England (UNE) for the scholarship I received to undertake this research, and the support I received from both organisations. I want to thank my supervisors: Professor Brian Sindel (UNE), Drs Michael Widderick, Mandy Christopher, and Steve Walker (DEEDI, Toowoomba), and Drs Ian Taylor and Hanwen Wu in the early days of my study. I have benefited and developed as a researcher from the contributions each of my supervisors has made to this project and the ultimate completion of this thesis. I want to especially express my sincere thanks and gratitude to Michael, Mandy and Brian for continuing to hang in there and support and motivate me through to the end of this project. Michael, I couldn't have done it without you, the home visits and the chocolate biscuits.

In addition I want to thank the staff at the Leslie Research Centre in Toowoomba for their friendship over the years. Thanks to the members of the Weed Science team and the Biotech team for their help in setting up trails and keeping me motivated. David, Geoff, Churchie, Jeff and Luke thanks for your help and support, and Raelene and Tracey when it came to laboratory work, I couldn't have coped without your guidance and patience. I also want to thank the administration staff Sue-Ellen, Kathy and Kelly for their help and good humour over the years. Additionally I need to thank Kerry Bell for stepping in at the last moment to finalise my statistics; she made me appreciate how important getting good statistical advice at the beginning of your research is.

Finally I can't express how important the support of my family and friends has been during this period. Everyone has encouraged me to complete this thesis and every time I considered giving up you were there saying 'not a good idea'. Thanks guys, you didn't have to but you kept reminding me of what my goal should be and not to leave things unfinished. Dad, Debbie and Lance, Alana and John, Jacinta, Dawn,

Esmae and Rael's -you've been my main protagonists over these long years and thank you so much for persevering. Love you all.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	i
Declaration .....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
List of Tables.....	ix
List of Figures .....	xi
List of Photographs .....	xv

<b>Chapter 1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
-------------------------------------	----------

<b>Chapter 2 Literature Review.....</b>	<b>5</b>
---	----------

2.1	Introduction .....	6
2.2	<i>Echinochloa</i> species as problem weeds overseas and in Australia .....	8
2.2.1	Overseas .....	8
2.2.2	Australia .....	11
2.3	Economic impacts of <i>E. crus-galli</i> and <i>E. colona</i> in Australian cropping systems.....	13
2.4	Distribution, ecology and biology of <i>E. crus-galli</i> and <i>E. colona</i> .....	14
2.4.1	<i>Echinochloa crus-galli</i> .....	14
2.4.2	<i>Echinochloa colona</i> .....	23
2.5	Taxonomy of <i>Echinochloa</i> species.....	28
2.5.1	Historical background .....	28
2.5.2	General description .....	29
2.6	Molecular characterisation.....	33
2.6.1	Application of molecular markers in weed taxonomy and research .....	34
2.6.2	Review of available molecular techniques .....	34
2.6.3	Application of molecular marker techniques to studies of <i>Echinochloa</i> species .....	39
2.6.4	Taxonomic confusions and difficulties in species identification.....	42
2.7	Management of <i>E. crus-galli</i> and <i>E. colona</i> in cropping systems of the northern grain region .....	44
2.7.1	Northern grain region (NGR) .....	44
2.7.2	Farming systems .....	44
2.7.3	Integrated weed management (IWM) practices .....	45
2.8	Herbicide susceptibility and the development of herbicide resistance .....	48
2.8.1	Herbicide susceptibility and tolerance .....	48
2.8.2	Herbicide resistance .....	49
2.9	Conclusion.....	52

## ***Chapter 3 Morphological Studies ..... 55***

<b>3.1</b>	<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>3.2</b>	<b>Aim.....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>3.3</b>	<b>Materials and methods.....</b>	<b>58</b>
3.3.1	Site selection.....	58
3.3.2	In-field identification of <i>E. colona</i> and <i>E. crus-galli</i> .....	62
3.3.3	Seed characteristics .....	64
3.3.4	Morphological trials .....	66
<b>3.4</b>	<b>Results.....</b>	<b>74</b>
3.4.1	Field collections .....	74
3.4.2	Morphological trials .....	86
<b>3.5</b>	<b>Discussion.....</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>3.6</b>	<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>106</b>

## ***Chapter 4 Molecular Studies ..... 108***

<b>4.1</b>	<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>109</b>
<b>4.2</b>	<b>Aim.....</b>	<b>110</b>
<b>4.3</b>	<b>Materials and methods.....</b>	<b>110</b>
4.3.1	Sample collection, preparation and storage .....	110
4.3.2	DNA extraction .....	111
4.3.3	Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) .....	113
4.3.4	Visualisation of DNA and PCR products .....	115
4.3.5	Data analysis .....	117
4.3.6	Experiment one – assessment of SSRs .....	118
4.3.7	Experiment two – population genetic diversity .....	118
4.3.8	Experiment three – heterozygosity testing .....	119
<b>4.4</b>	<b>Results.....</b>	<b>120</b>
4.4.1	Experiment one – assessment of SSRs .....	120
4.4.2	Experiment two – population genetic diversity .....	127
4.4.3	Experiment three – heterozygosity testing .....	136
<b>4.5</b>	<b>Discussion.....</b>	<b>138</b>
<b>4.6</b>	<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>141</b>

## ***Chapter 5 Herbicide Susceptibility..... 143***

<b>5.1</b>	<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>144</b>
<b>5.2</b>	<b>Aim.....</b>	<b>146</b>



<b>5.3</b>	<b>Materials and methods.....</b>	<b>147</b>
5.3.1	<i>Trial establishment and management .....</i>	147
5.3.2	<i>Experimental design .....</i>	149
5.3.3	<i>Treatment imposition .....</i>	149
5.3.4	<i>Measurements .....</i>	150
5.3.5	<i>Data analysis .....</i>	152
<b>5.4</b>	<b>Results.....</b>	<b>153</b>
5.4.1	<i>Effect of population .....</i>	155
5.4.2	<i>Effect of species .....</i>	163
5.4.3	<i>Effect of region .....</i>	165
<b>5.5</b>	<b>Discussion.....</b>	<b>167</b>
<b>5.6</b>	<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>171</b>
 <b><i>Chapter 6 General Conclusion.....</i></b>		<b><i>173</i></b>
<b>6.1</b>	<b>Morphological and molecular characterisation of <i>E. crus-galli</i> and <i>E. colona</i> .....</b>	<b>174</b>
<b>6.2</b>	<b>Relationships between morphology, molecular diversity and herbicide susceptibility.....</b>	<b>177</b>
<b>6.3</b>	<b>Future research.....</b>	<b>180</b>
<b>6.4</b>	<b>Implications for weed management.....</b>	<b>181</b>
 <b><i>References .....</i></b>		<b><i>183</i></b>
<b><i>Appendices.....</i></b>		<b><i>202</i></b>

## List of Tables

Table 2.1: <i>Echinochloa</i> species known to occur in Australia listed by region of origin (Source: Hetherington 2003; Michael 1973, 1983, 1999, 2001; Michael and Vickery 1980; Sharp and Simon 2002).	11
Table 2.2: Comparison of four molecular marker techniques used in genetic diversity studies of <i>Echinochloa</i> (Sources: Karp <i>et al.</i> 1997; Powell <i>et al.</i> 1996).	40
Table 2.3: Principal characteristics distinguishing <i>E. crus-galli</i> and <i>E. colona</i> (Adapted from Michael 1983; Yabuno 1983).	43
Table 2.4: Confirmed populations of herbicide resistant <i>E. crus-galli</i> indicating mode of action and the country where the resistance occurred (Source: Heap 2010).	50
Table 2.5: Confirmed populations of herbicide resistant <i>E. colona</i> indicating mode of action and the country where the resistance occurred (Source: Heap 2010).	50
Table 3.1 Summary of the 21 fields sampled across the northern grain region for <i>Echinochloa</i> species, indicating the habitat, the total number of collection points sampled in each field and the number of plants of each species sampled (SQ-southern Queensland, CQ-central Queensland, NSW-northern New South Wales).	61
Table 3.2: Characteristics recorded for <i>Echinochloa</i> plants sampled in the field, describing the state of each characteristic and the rating scale used to establish a coding system.	64
Table 3.3: <i>Echinochloa colona</i> and <i>E. crus-galli</i> populations established in the two morphological trials of 2005/2006 and 2006/2007 indicating the population labels used in Chapter 3 and the original population IDs assigned to the plants sampled in the field. Refer to 3.3.1.1 for description of population ID.	70
Table 3.4: Morphological characteristics recorded for <i>E. colona</i> and <i>E. crus-galli</i> in the morphological trials and the growth stages at which they were measured (R - onset of reproduction, F - flag leaf extended, M - onset of maturity). Ratings devised for characteristics are described below.	72
Table 3.5: Percentage of the total plants sampled categorised according to the growth form observed in the field for <i>E. colona</i> and <i>E. crus-galli</i> .	76
Table 3.6: Comparison of the percentage of seeds that germinated using unscarified and scarified methods. Two scarification techniques were used – manual (sandpaper) and acid (concentrated sulphuric acid – H <sub>2</sub> SO <sub>4</sub> ). All seeds were incubated using a 12 hr day/night regime. The manual scarification was undertaken using three temperature regimes (25°C, 28°C, 31°C) while the acid scarification was only conducted at 25°C (nd – no data).	87
Table 3.7: Comparison of the average values for morphological characteristics of two populations of mature Narrabri <i>E. crus-galli</i> populations grown in both trials.	99
Table 4.1 Sequences of the SSR markers used (Danquah <i>et al.</i> 2002a).	113
Table 4.2: PCR reaction mixture including stock and final concentrations of products.	114
Table 4.3: <i>Echinochloa colona</i> and <i>E. crus-galli</i> populations which successfully visualised product for all five SSRs, indicating the population labels used in Chapter 4 and the original population IDs assigned to the plants sampled in the field. Refer to 3.3.1.1 for description of population ID.	128

Table 4.4: Summary of the base pairs (bp) amplified by the 5 SSRs of Danquah <i>et al.</i> (2002a) common to all populations within both <i>E. crus-galli</i> and <i>E. colona</i> run on a Beckman CEQ 8800. ....	129
Table 4.5 The base pair complexes scored using marker EC3 present in the 22 <i>E. colona</i> populations included in the morphological study, listed according to regional centre. ....	130
Table 4.6: The intra-specific variations scored using marker EC4 present in the 22 <i>E. colona</i> populations included in the morphological study, listed according to regional centre. ....	131
Table 4.7: The base pair peaks/complexes scored for three <i>E. colona</i> plants included in the morphological study and progeny grown from seed collected from each plant using markers EC3 and EC4, listed according to regional centre (✓ present in parent, ✱ absent in parent).. ....	137
Table 4.8: The base pair peaks/complexes scored for two <i>E. crus-galli</i> plants included in the morphological study and progeny grown from seed collected from each plant using markers EC3 and EC5, listed according to regional centre (✓ present in parent, ✱ absent in parent).. ....	137
Table 5.1: <i>Echinochloa colona</i> and <i>E. crus-galli</i> populations established in the herbicide susceptibility trial indicating the population labels used in Chapter 5 and the original population IDs assigned to the plants sampled in the field. Refer to 3.3.1.1 for description of population ID.....	147
Table 5.2: Ratings assigned to individual plants indicating the amount of damage obvious in a visual examination (Adapted from: Australian Weeds Committee 1979).....	151
Table 5.3: Percentage of the replicates within each treatment displaying visual damage three and fourteen days (DAT) after the herbicide treatments (0.25 L/ha, 0.50 L/ha and 1.0 L/ha).....	153
Table 5.4: Comparison of the average biomass (g) of each of the ten cluster groups across each of the three glyphosate treatments (0.25L, 0.50L, 1.0L). Means, within each treatment sharing the same characters are not significantly different ( $p < 0.001$ ). ....	163
Table 6.1: Comparison of <i>E. crus-galli</i> and <i>E. colona</i> populations and how the populations clustered, based on similarity of traits, in each of the three studies (morphology, molecular and herbicide response). The cluster number under each heading refers to the cluster in which the population appeared in the relevant chapter. Separate dendrograms were produced for the two morphological trials in 2005/2006 ( <i>E. colona</i> ) and 2006/2007 ( <i>E. crus-galli</i> ). The population ID used in this table is identical to that used in the herbicide study (Table 5.1), identifying the regional centre (W – Wowan, D – Dalby, N –Narrabri), the species (C – <i>E. colona</i> , G – <i>E. crus-galli</i> ) and the population number within each species. Where there are gaps in the table, the population was not tested in the associated experiment due to lack of seed, failure to establish, or failure to generate genetic products. (# Population NG15 was established in both morphological trials).....	178

## List of Figures

Figure 2.1: Plant growth forms (a) caespitose - growing in dense tufts and (b) decumbent - reclining on ground but with tips ascending (Source: Harris and Harris 1999).....	6
Figure 2.2: Distribution of <i>E. crus-galli</i> , indicating the major crops in which it occurs as a serious or principal weed (Source: Holm <i>et al.</i> 1977).....	9
Figure 2.3: Distribution of <i>E. colona</i> , indicating the major crops in which it occurs as a serious, principal or common weed (Source: Holm <i>et al.</i> 1977).....	10
Figure 2.4: Global distribution of <i>E. crus-galli</i> indicating where it has been reported as a weed and the number of crops it infests (Source: Holm <i>et al.</i> 1977).....	15
Figure 2.5: The distribution of <i>E. crus-galli</i> in Australia according to specimens lodged with Australian herbaria (Source: Australia's Virtual Herbarium 2010).....	16
Figure 2.6: The distribution of <i>E. colona</i> indicating where it has been reported as a weed (Source: Holm <i>et al.</i> 1977).....	24
Figure 2.7: The distribution of <i>E. colona</i> in Australia according to specimens lodged with Australian herbaria (Source: Australia's Virtual Herbarium 2010).....	24
Figure 2.8: Line sketches displaying the seedling and mature habits of <i>E. crus-galli</i> (L.) Beauv. (Source: Holm <i>et al.</i> 1977).....	30
Figure 2.9: Line sketches displaying the seedling and mature habits of <i>E. colona</i> (L.) Link (Source: Holm <i>et al.</i> 1977).....	32
Figure 3.1: The northern grain region of Australia, showing the three major regional centres and the locations where populations were sampled (not to scale).....	59
Figure 3.2: <i>Echinochloa colona</i> growth categories present in the fields sampled across the three major cropping centres of the northern grain region presented as a percentage of the total number of <i>E. colona</i> plants sampled. Three categories are not shown, as their contributions were less than 0.1%.....	78
Figure 3.3: Distribution of growth categories of <i>E. colona</i> across the three major cropping centres of the northern grain region (a-Dalby, b-Wowan, c-Narrabri) expressed as a percentage of the total number of <i>E. colona</i> plants collected (S – stout culm, F – fine culm).....	80
Figure 3.4: The percentage of the five growth forms (erect to prostrate) observed in <i>E. colona</i> occurring in the different habitats sampled in each of the regional centres (W – Wowan, D – Dalby, N – Narrabri). Numbers appearing on the bars of the graph indicate the number of fields included in each of the different habitats.....	81
Figure 3.5: <i>Echinochloa crus-galli</i> growth categories present in two of the three major cropping centres of the northern grain region, presented as a percentage of the total <i>E. crus-galli</i> plants sampled.....	83
Figure 3.6: Relationship between the average length and width measurements of <i>E. colona</i> (▲ — Dalby, ◆ — Narrabri, ■ — Wowan) and <i>E. crus-galli</i> (+ — Dalby, * — Narrabri) seeds. ....	84

Figure 3.7: Comparison of the average lengths (mm) of 30 seeds from 29 <i>E. colona</i> (left to right: Narrabri (9), Wowan (11), Dalby (9)) and 26 <i>E. crus-galli</i> populations (left to right: Narrabri (20), Dalby (6)). (LSD for <i>E. colona</i> is 0.085 and for <i>E. crus-galli</i> is 0.114). Bracketed populations are discussed below.....	85
Figure 3.8: <i>Echinochloa colona</i> growth categories present in the morphology trial presented as a percentage of the total <i>E. colona</i> plants grown from the seeds of 30 populations collected across the northern grain region.....	89
Figure 3.9: Unweighted pair group method (UPGMA) dendrogram using Euclidian distance coefficient of dissimilarity to compare morphological similarities among populations of 30 <i>E. colona</i> (Dalby – blue, Wowan – pink, Narrabri – brown) and 6 <i>E. crus-galli</i> (green) at the onset of the reproductive phase. A threshold of 100 resulted in nine clusters that are numbered accordingly.....	91
Figure 3.10: Unweighted pair group method (UPGMA) dendrogram using Euclidian distance coefficient of dissimilarity to compare morphological similarities among populations of 30 <i>E. colona</i> (Dalby – blue, Wowan – pink, Narrabri – brown) and 6 <i>E. crus-galli</i> (green) at the onset of maturity. A threshold of 100 resulted in six clusters that are numbered accordingly.....	93
Figure 3.11: Growth categories found in 27 populations of <i>E. crus-galli</i> grown in the morphological trial in 2006/2007 shown as a percentage of the total progeny grown.....	96
Figure 3.12: Unweighted pair group method (UPGMA) dendrogram using Euclidian distance coefficient of dissimilarity among populations of 27 <i>E. crus-galli</i> at the onset of the reproductive phase (Dalby - pink; Narrabri – blue). A threshold of 100 resulted in four clusters that are numbered accordingly.....	97
Figure 3.13: Unweighted pair group method (UPGMA) dendrogram using Euclidian distance coefficient of dissimilarity among 27 populations of <i>E. crus-galli</i> at the onset of the maturity phase (Dalby - pink; Narrabri – blue) A threshold of 100 resulted in six clusters that are numbered accordingly.....	98
Figure 4.1: CEQ output for one of the Narrabri <i>E. crus-galli</i> plants showing 8 peaks/complexes (EC1 & EC2 - black, EC3 - blue, EC4 & EC5 - green, 600 bp ladder - red). The x axis shows the fragment size in base pairs (bp) and the y axis the dye signal corresponding to band intensity.....	122
Figure 4.2: CEQ output for one of the Kingsthorpe <i>E. colona</i> plants showing 8 peaks/complexes (EC1 & EC2 - black, EC3 - blue, EC4 & EC5 - green, 600 bp ladder - red). The x axis shows the fragment size in base pairs (bp) and the y axis the dye signal corresponding to band intensity.....	123
Figure 4.3: CEQ output for EC1 for the two species with a major peak at 124 bp for <i>E. crus-galli</i> and at 110 bp for <i>E. colona</i> . The x axis shows the fragment size in base pairs (bp) and the y axis the dye signal corresponding to band intensity.....	123
Figure 4.4: CEQ output for EC2 showing a major band at 175 bp for both species. The small peak at 173 bp for <i>E. colona</i> was inconsistent in all plants and often close to the height of the ladder. The x axis shows the fragment size in base pairs (bp) and the y axis the dye signal corresponding to band intensity.....	124
Figure 4.5: CEQ output for EC3 for the two species. <i>Echinochloa crus-galli</i> had a large complex comprising a doublet at 78/79 bp followed by a quad at 83-86 bp and <i>E. colona</i> a complex with two doublets at 82/83 bp and 85/86 bp. Small peaks are visible in <i>E. colona</i> at 109-112 bp and 156-159 bp. The x axis shows the fragment size in base pairs (bp) and the y axis the dye signal corresponding to band intensity.....	125

- Figure 4.6: CEQ output for EC4 showing a major peak at 180 bp for both species. Small peaks were observed for *E. crus-galli* at 169 bp and 185 bp and for this *E. colona* additional peaks were scored at 202 bp and 214 bp. The x axis shows the fragment size in base pairs (bp) and the y axis the dye signal corresponding to band intensity..... 126
- Figure 4.7: CEQ output for EC5 showing a major peak at 92 bp for *E. crus-galli* and a doublet at 92/93 bp for *E. colona*. A smaller peak was also scored for *E. colona* at 97 bp. The x axis shows the fragment size in base pairs (bp) and the y axis the dye signal corresponding to band intensity.....127
- Figure 4.8: The CEQ output of *E. colona* populations scored in the range 100 bp to 150 bp using EC3 (a - Dalby 109-112 bp, b - Narrabri 115-118 bp, c - Wowan 143-146 bp). The x axis shows the fragment size in base pairs (bp) and the y axis the dye signal corresponding to band intensity..... 130
- Figure 4.9: Unweighted pair group method (UPGMA) dendrogram using Jaccard dissimilarity among 22 *E. colona* (Dalby 1-7, Narrabri 8-12, Wowan 13-22) and 23 *E. crus-galli* populations (Dalby 23-30, Narrabri 31-45) based on presence/absence of peaks/clusters generated from the five SSRs EC1 to EC5.....132
- Figure 4.10: Unweighted pair group method (UPGMA) dendrogram using Jaccard dissimilarity among 27 *E. crus-galli* plants (9 Dalby, 18 Narrabri) and 155 *E. colona* plants (25 Narrabri, 50 Wowan, 80 Dalby) showing regional genetic diversity. Some regional centre clusters have been highlighted (Dalby – red, Narrabri – green, Wowan – brown).....135
- Figure 5.1: Average dry weight biomass of 18 *E. crus-galli* populations at each of the four glyphosate treatments at 14 DAT showing the response of the populations to the different herbicide rates.....156
- Figure 5.2: Average dry weight biomass of 18 *E. colona* populations at each of the four glyphosate treatments at 14 DAT showing the response of the populations to the different herbicide rates..... 157
- Figure 5.3: The average dry weight biomass of 18 populations each of *E. colona* and *E. crus-galli* at four rates of glyphosate (0 L/ha, 0.25 L/ha, 0.5 L/ha, 1.0 L/ha) using the back-transformed means of ANOVA adjusted for covariates at 14 DAT (LSD on transformed data = 0.7084). (Refer Appendix 4 for the log-transformed data)..... 159
- Figure 5.4: Heirarchical clustering of 18 populations each of *E. crus-galli* and *E. colona* from across the NGR. Solid lines on the y axis indicate the populations contained within each of the 10 clusters formed at a threshold of 0.97..... 160
- Figure 5.5: The response of the populations contained in each cluster to the three glyphosate treatments (0.25 L, 0.50L, 1.0 L).....161
- Figure 5.6: Average dry weight biomass for cluster groups for the combination of 0.25L and 0.5L herbicide rates expressed as a proportion of control, indicating levels of susceptibility of each of the populations within the clusters to herbicide treatments at 14 DAT.....162
- Figure 5.7: Average visual damage ratings to *E. crus-galli* and *E. colona* plants within each of the three herbicide treatments 14 days after treatment (DAT). (Standard errors for 1.0 L treatment were 0.00 and 0.014 respectively)..... 164
- Figure 5.8: Average visual damage rating to *E. crus-galli* plants from the regional centres Dalby and Narrabri at 14 days after treatment (DAT). (Standard error for Narrabri 1.0 L was 0.00)..... 165

<b>Figure 5.9: Average visual damage rating to <i>E. colona</i> plants from the regional centres Dalby, Narrabri and Wowan at 14 days after treatment (DAT). (Standard errors for all 1.0 L treatments were 0.00).....</b>	<b>166</b>
<b>Figure 5.10: The average log-transformed dry weight of all the combined populations of each species (EC – <i>E. colona</i>, ECG – <i>E. crus-galli</i>) calculated according to the three regional centres and the overall response to the four glyphosate treatments (0.0 L, 0.25 L, 0.50 L, 1.0L). (LSD = 0.298).....</b>	<b>167</b>

## List of Photographs

Photograph 3.1: <i>Echinochloa colona</i> displaying transverse purple banding across the leaves. This plant has a prostrate growth form and stout culms. ....	62
Photograph 3.2: The inflorescences of <i>E. colona</i> (a) and <i>E. crus-galli</i> (b) showing the absence/presence of bristles along the racemes. ....	63
Photograph 3.3: Image produced of <i>E. crus-galli</i> seeds from one of the plants sampled at Dalby showing the length and width measurements calculated using the AxioVision Release 4.4 software (Inset: close-up).....	65
Photograph 3.4: Examples of the five growth forms used to categorise both species (a – erect, b - erect/semi-erect, c – semi-erect, d – semi-erect/prostrate, e – prostrate). All examples shown are <i>E. colona</i> . ....	75
Photograph 3.5: Difference in culm thickness, evident here in <i>E. colona</i> (a - stout, b - fine).....	77
Photograph 3.6: Colour comparison of mature <i>E. colona</i> and <i>E. crus-galli</i> caryopses. Those of <i>E. colona</i> are cream in colour (left) whereas in <i>E. crus-galli</i> they are light brown (right). .....	86
Photograph 3.7: Different pigmentations observed in the culms of <i>E. colona</i> and <i>E. crus-galli</i> (a – nil, b – pale, c – dark and concentrated at base, d – dark and extending up stem).....	88
Photograph 3.8: Two panicle heads of <i>E. crus-galli</i> showing the two forms observed in the morphological trials (a - pyramidal, b - columnar). A single awn, visible in ‘b’ is indicative of the awning present on the majority of plants grown in the trial. ....	95
Photograph 4.1: PCR results of DNA with non-labelled primers using DNA extracted using wheat and barley procedure. The 8% non-denaturing polyacrylamide gel clearly shows differentiation between <i>E. crus-galli</i> (left 1-5) and <i>E. colona</i> (right 6-10) within each of the five SSRs (EC1-EC5). Lane 10 in EC1 failed to amplify. Possible intra-specific variations indicated in EC2, EC3 and EC5. The 100 bp ladder is shown in the first and last lanes of the gel, each dark bar indicates an increment of 100 bp.....	121
Photograph 5.1: Set-up of pots in replicate groups in polyhouse prior to culling.....	148
Photograph 5.2: Spray bike used to apply glyphosate treatments to replicates of <i>Echinochoa</i> species.....	150
Photograph 5.3: Examples of <i>E. colona</i> showing the visual damage considered to be (a) negligible, (b) slight, (c) moderate, and (d) substantial to severe at 14 DAT.....	154