

Medusahead Rye

(Elymus caput-medusa)
(Taeniatherum asperum)



Where does it grow? Medusahead is scattered throughout the Pacific Northwest. It can be found in California, Washington, Idaho, and Oregon. It grows in the humid coastal range in Oregon as well as in the semi-arid interior. Poor condition ranges offer an open invitation to invasion by medusahead. It was introduced into the United States from the Mediterranean area and has been in Oregon for over 70 years.

Is it important? Yes, it is a serious range weed in parts of Oregon. Livestock eat it only sparingly early in the spring before it heads out. It is a strong competitor and occupies space that could be supporting desirable forage plants. It matures early in the spring, usually about 2 weeks later than cheat-grass. When mature, the long, harsh, sharp awns prevent utilization by animals and are often the cause of animal injury.

Considerable time, effort, and money are being expended by researchers in an attempt to find a means of economically controlling this plant. Due to a high silicone content, litter of medusahead breaks down slowly. It tends to accumulate on the ground and develops into a thick mat. This thick litter mat prevents establishment of other plants and sometimes causes a thin stand of medusahead.

What does it look like? It is an annual that germinates in the fall winter or spring. Spring growth of medusahead depends somewhat on the moisture situation, but in general, it makes its growth in early spring, matures in June and dies in late June or July. Medusahead grows to about one foot in height. It takes on a reddish cast as it ripens, then bleaches to a shiny light straw color after maturity.

Leaves of the plant are basal and sparse. The seed stalks support a large bushy appearing head. Both the seeds and the head have beards up to 4 inches long. Most of the seeds fall after ripening. The beards remaining on the head continue to give the plant a bushy look.

Description:

Length of Life--Annual.

Height--Usually about 1 foot but will vary from a few inches to 18 inches depending upon available moisture.

Growth Period--Germinates in fall or early spring, matures and dies in late June or July.

Bunch or Sod--Bunch.

How does it spread?--By seed only. Entire seed heads may be blown by the wind. Seeds stick to clothes and animals.

Leaf Shape--Narrow, short, pointed. Most leaves are located at the base of the plant.

Seed--About 1/2 to 3/4 inch long. In addition, the beard on the seed may be 3 to 4 inches long.

Does it look like anything else? Until it is once identified properly medusahead may be confused with some of the foxtails, wild barleys, and squirreltail bottlebrush. However, once properly identified, it will never be confused. The long, spreading, twisted, but not bent beards on the seeds and head give it an easily recognized appearance.

Can it be controlled? Good range management is the only presently known means of arresting its spread. Chemical and cultural methods of control are being studied.