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THE NEXT BIG THING

In the future, invasive weeds will solve all our problems?

WONDER WEED "It's high yielding. It's fast growing. And it's drought tolerant," enthuses Wil Glenn, spokesman for the Biofuels Center of North Carolina. It's called *Arundo donax*, or giant reed, and biofuel promoters believe it could be the miracle feedstock they've been waiting for. Next year, the Italian company Chemtex International will open a commercial cellulosic ethanol plant in Clinton, North Carolina—one of several under construction. The factory is expected to produce 20 million gallons of biofuel a year, a third of it from 100,000 tons of locally grown arundo.



UH-OH But the weed's hardiness is a mixed blessing. Native to India, it has been labeled as an invasive plant or a noxious weed in eight states. It grows as much as 10 inches a day. It can resprout from root fragments buried nine feet deep. Fire won't kill it, and floods tend to spread it. In California, where it was planted for erosion control in the 1800s, it clogs river channels, sucking up vast amounts of water, squeezing out native plants and wildlife, and costing the state up to \$25,000 an acre to eradicate it.

SPREAD BY STORMS Its effects could be even worse in the South. Arundo sprouts readily from rhizomes or even a fragment of broken stalk. "In coastal North Carolina we have some bodacious hurricanes from time to time," notes Sam Pearsall of the Environmental Defense Fund. "Imagine stalks of arundo uprooted by the storm—wherever they end up when the water goes down, they're going to grow."

EPA SAYS A-OK! Despite such worries, in 2011 the EPA approved arundo as a biofuel feedstock under the federal renewable fuel standard program, a move that provoked letters of protest signed by more than 200 scientists and 70 environmental groups. The agency is now reconsidering. "It's pretty clear that it's an invasive plant in California," says Doug Johnson of the California Invasive Plant Council. "For those of us who are aware of the impacts, it's a pretty scary thing to consider."

—Dashka Slater

NEXT: [The Wind Is Red](#)

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Anna Weitzman

Uh, let's not let loose (well looser) an invasive and dangerous species. This is one that is likely to do more harm than good to many ecosystems! Tell the EPA No!

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