This is an ACTUAL NOTIFICATION

Issued By: NYS - DHSES - Office of Fire Prevention & Control

Headline: UPDATE: Caution: Contact with Giant Hogweed plant can Cause Injury

Description:

Caution: Contact with Giant Hogweed Plant Can Cause Injury

With the grass, brush, and forest fire (wildfire) season upon us -- and fire departments conducting missing person searches – the New York State Office of Fire Prevention and Control is advising fire departments and emergency managers of a potential serious health hazard outdoors: the Giant Hogweed plant.

Giant Hogweed has been identified in many areas of New York State. This plant is highly toxic to humans. According to the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, just the mere brushing against the leaves can result in the plant releasing a poisonous sap. The sap causes severe skin irritation and will result in a very painful rash that can last from six months to six years depending on the seriousness of the exposure. Severe skin contamination may result in a rash that could resemble thermal burns. If the sap contacts the eyes, temporary blindness may result. In the most severe cases, the sap has been known to cause permanent blindness. Sunlight seems to exacerbate the condition. Research indicates that direct skin contact with Giant Hogweed sap induces extreme photosensitivity, which can lead to severe, slow to heal burns and scarring.

Considerations for Fire Suppression and Search and Rescue Operations

When responding to an emergency incident in the wild land environment, emergency responders need to be aware of the potential for exposure toxic plants such as giant hogweed, poison ivy, and poison sumac.

Appropriate PPE must be worn for grass, brush, or forest fire incidents. Bunker gear can add to the heat stress of firefighters, therefore, PPE for fire suppression operations may include sturdy work boots, long pants (preferably heavy denim), long-sleeved work shirt (preferably the traditional yellow fire retardant work shirt worn by forest firefighting personnel), and heavy work gloves. A helmet with eye goggles should also be worn.

There is concern that the oils and resins in the toxic sap may be carried in the smoke of the burning plants. Respiratory protection must be considered should such an airborne hazard be identified. Moving personnel out of the smoke may be the only viable option for protection. Protection of the down-wind civilian population must also be considered. Shelter-In-Place is a viable option for the public.

The same protective clothing (work boots, long denim pants, long-sleeved work shirt, gloves and head & eye protection) should be utilized for non-fire emergency operations, such as searches for lost persons..

Remember that proper PPE for incidents in the wild land environment will increase the heat stress on emergency responders. Incident Commanders, chief officers, and line officers must keep a close watch on personnel for the signs and symptoms of heat-related health issues. Adequate rehabilitation and rehydration measures must be incorporated for any operation that will likely last longer than one hour. Adequate and reliable communications must be available for all teams involved in wildland operations.

History

Giant hogweed was first introduced to the United States as an ornamental plant in 1917. It has since been listed by the federal government as an invasive and toxic plant. Environmentally these plants can disrupt and cause severe diminishment of an area's natural flora. It reproduces rapidly and one plant may produce as few as 20,000 seeds to as many as 100,000. The seeds can be spread via birds, waterways, or wind and remain viable for nearly a decade. An infestation can quickly choke-out all other plants in the area and can contribute to soil erosion.

In addition to New York State, Giant Hogweed has been documented in the following states: Maine, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Maryland, Oregon, Washington, Michigan, Massachusetts, Virginia and Vermont and is spreading.

Identification

Habitat: disturbed soils, roadsides, stream and river banks, railway embankments, and fallow fields. Fallow fields are fields that have been plowed but left unseeded or unused.

Leaves**:** palmately compound (shaped like a hand with outstretched fingers), with three deeply incised leaflets, with spotted leaf stalk, enormous, lower leaves can be 5' wide. Only basal leaves are produced the first year.

Flowers**:** 50-150 white, small, many borne in large, loose umbels (umbrella-shaped) at tops of stems. Blooms late June through August. Giant hogweed flowers resemble those of a very large Queen Anne's lace.

Stems: often purple-mottled, up to 4-in in diameter, hollow and ridged.

Fruit**:** flat, oval dry fruit, .375" long, broadly rounded base and broad marginal ridges

Reproduction**:** by seed

More Information/Web Links:

DEC Identification: http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/72766.html
DEC Health & Safety: http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/72556.html
DEC Statewide Distribution Map: http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/41952.html
DEC more links: http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/39809.html