

Protocols for Vegetation Surveys of Field Trials Sites Created by Chris Benda, Botanist, Makanda, IL

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PURPOSE: This document is meant to serve as a guide for conducting vegetation surveys for English Springer Spaniel Field Trials (ESSFT) regarding identifying any plants that might pose a risk for dogs.

PROBLEM: Seeds from some plants found regularly in the cover used for Spaniel field trials can penetrate the dog's skin and/or are inhaled as the dog is questing for game. These seeds can carry problematic bacteria from their environment or pick up bacteria in the mouth as they are inhaled which can create an abscessing infection in the dog's body. Barbed or awned seeds frequently migrate once they enter the dog's body and potentially create more widespread infections. These infections, particularly in the chest cavity or lung, can be debilitating to fatal for the affected dog. In order to safeguard the field trial participants' dogs it is imperative that diligence be exercised to provide as detailed a report as possible to inform participants of the plants present at the site.

SOLUTION: In order to serve the best interests of the field trial participants and their dogs, it is recommended that managers of the field trials hire an agronomist, botanist, or taxonomist to conduct vegetation surveys throughout the grasslands where the field trials are set to occur and provide a report of the findings far enough in advance of an event to allow for changes in plans if significant hazards are found. The hired professional is required to be proficient in the identification of grasses.

MONITORING: The hired professional will thoroughly survey all potential areas that might be used for the field trials. It is recommended that more grasslands than required be selected for the surveys so there are backup sites as a contingency. Surveys should employ a random meander method for inspection of the vegetation present. Using Global Positioning System (GPS), the surveyor will record their tracks to overlay on aerial imagery. The hired professional will maintain a minimum of 50 meters in between tracks to ensure adequate coverage. It is recommended that the surveyor identify all plants encountered during the survey. Plants should be identified to the species level, but in some cases, plants might only be able to be identified to the genus level. Ideally, several surveys throughout the growing season should be conducted, but if that's not possible a qualified botanist should be able to identify most of the dominant vegetation during one visit any time of the year.

The list of plants identified at each site will be entered into the Universal FQA calculator (<https://universalfqa.org/>) if a database is available for the region where the surveys occur. This tool will generate a table with conservation metrics such as species richness, in addition to plant characteristics and botanical and common names for each plant species. FQA stands for Floristic Quality Analysis and is an easy way to consistently present a list of plants and allow participants to understand the natural quality of a site, in a general sense. Sites with higher coefficient of conservatism values (C values) are higher in natural quality and more representative of a site with intact natural community remnants, and therefore to be less infested with "weeds," which includes some of the plants reported to cause problems for dogs. Plant nomenclature will follow whatever database is selected and if none is applicable, the surveyor will present the current botanical and common names for plants as listed on the USDA Plants database, located at <https://plants.usda.gov/home>.

A list of all plants identified and areas surveyed will be provided in a report that will be made available to participants. Areas with potentially problematic plant species will be recorded with GPS and denoted on the map of the areas surveyed. Problematic species will vary from site to site, but generally includes grasses with awns or barbs or plants with other armature. Additionally, photos will be taken, or specimens collected, of each potentially problematic plant species so they can be verified as necessary.

DISCLAIMER: The report serves as a guide for participants to better understand the conditions of the fields where the field trials occur. It is logistically impossible to provide a comprehensive assessment of the areas surveyed. Problematic plants might still occur in the areas surveyed. The surveyor will not be held responsible for issues that arise from the field trials.

ENCLOSURE: The attached report serves as an example of the deliverable that is expected to be submitted to the hiring committee. Last updated 2/24/2023