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PAGE ONE

## Found in the Weeds: Bug Scientist Touts Cure for Levee Leaks

Engineers Ponder Benefits Of Fast-Growing Vetiver; Foe of Termites, Hangovers?

By SUSAN WARREN  
 August 22, 2007; Page A1

NEW ORLEANS -- Louisiana State University professor Gregg Henderson is a bug scientist, but lately he's been obsessed with grass.

In a city searching for ways to combat two great plagues -- termites and flooding -- Dr. Henderson believes an unremarkable-looking tall grass could be a new weapon to fight both. Vetiver grass's densely clumped stems quickly shoot up to 8 feet tall. It puts down a massive root system that has been touted for diverse uses, ranging from erosion protection for the hurricane-prone Gulf Coast to a treatment for baldness.



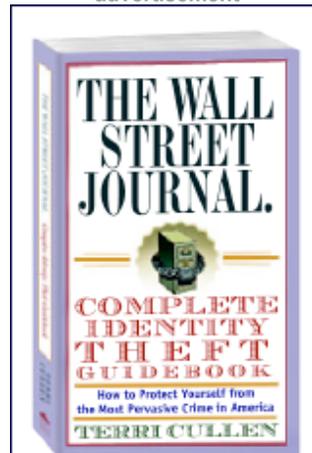
**Gregg Henderson**

Dr. Henderson, an entomologist at LSU's AgCenter, is interested in vetiver's ability to repel subterranean termites, including the rapacious Formosan species that is devouring much of New Orleans. His studies have convinced him vetiver would be ideal for reinforcing the city's protective floodwall system, fighting erosion and discouraging termite infestations that he believes have weakened the levees.

But the bug professor's vetiver crusade has hit a wall: the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The Corps, charged with fortifying the city's levees, is skeptical that the grass can really do all its advocates claim. And the Corps frets that vetiver isn't a native plant, which could be a problem if the plant proves to be invasive. Government officials are still wincing from the consequences of importing virulent kudzu -- known as "the vine that ate the South" -- to control erosion in the 1930s.

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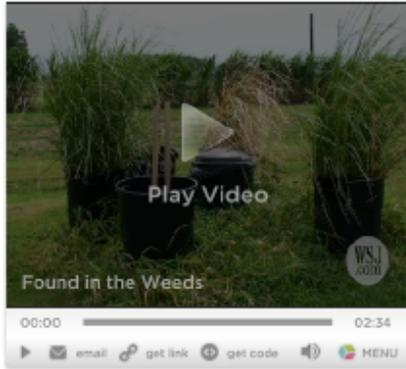
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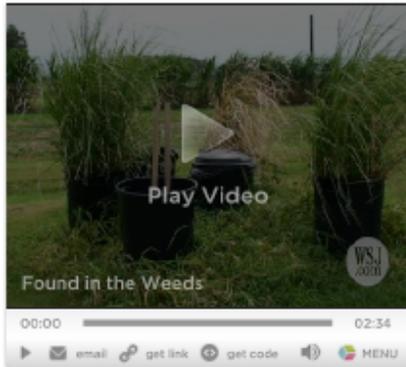


comes to vetiver," says Col. Murray Starkel, in charge of operations at the Corps' New Orleans district office.

It's not the first time vetiver has run into skeptics. A global organization known as the Vetiver Network has been preaching the virtues of the grass for three decades. It has succeeded in getting vetiver widely adopted in countries around the world. But in the U.S., "We have had no luck getting anyone's attention," says William Journey, a biologist and expert in rural water supply who became a vetiver believer through his work for Unicef and the World Bank in South Asia.



Engineers are skeptical about a very tall grass called Vetiver, which some are touting as a solution to erosion for vulnerable places like New Orleans.



Engineers are skeptical about a very tall grass called Vetiver, which some are touting as a solution to erosion for vulnerable places like New Orleans.

Guatemala, a villager confided to U.S. aid worker Jim Smyle that his wife brewed the roots in a tea to soothe her hormone-rattled

Vetiver is native to India. Its fibrous, aromatic roots have been harvested for centuries and turned into perfumes, insect-repelling textiles, closet sachets, and even food flavorings. The "Vetiver Grass System" caught on among foreign-aid workers in the 1970s and 1980s, who taught villagers and farmers how to use it for controlling erosion and water runoff. Vetiver could grow in sand or clay, in the desert or submerged in water.

The more people planted it, the more uses they found for it. In

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nerves. Others believed it was good for treating diabetes and high blood pressure. As for Mr. Smyle, who grows the grass around his home outside San Antonio, Texas, "I can personally attest to its worth as a hangover cure," he says.

But the Army Corps of Engineers has so far shunned the grass for what many believe to be its greatest use: erosion control. While vetiver can't survive in colder northern climates, devotees argue the grass is ideally suited to help protect hurricane-prone coastal areas in the South.

In a breakthrough, vetiver recently made a short list of 10 plants the Army Corps was considering for plantings along the New Orleans levees. "It has some characteristics worth exploring," concedes Col. Starkel. But Corps planners are concerned about vetiver's tendency to develop roots at its leaf joints. If pieces broke off and washed away during a flood, they could root elsewhere and spread the plant to places it's not wanted.

**MORE ON VETIVER**

Vetiver Network International promotes the grass for soil conservation and flood control. "Evaluation of vetiver grass root growth, oil distribution and repellency against Formosan subterranean termites," by Nix, K. E., G. Henderson, B. C.R. Zhu and R. A. Laine, published in HortScience, 2006. (Abstract. Subscription required.)  
 "Evaluation of vetiver oil and seven insect-active essential oils against the Formosan subterranean termite," by Zhu, B.C.R., G. Henderson, F. Chen, H. Fei and R. A. Laine, published in the Journal of Chemical Ecology, 2001. (Abstract. Subscription required.)

Vetiver advocates point to hundreds of years of cultivation abroad -- as well as in the U.S. -- to prove that the grass is well-behaved. The grass has been a part of the New Orleans landscape for two centuries without becoming invasive, say local residents. "I grew up knowing about vetiver," says Jean Fahr, president of the civic gardening group Parkway Partners. "My grandmother hung it in her closet to repel moths."

New Orleans nurseryman Don Heumann first learned about vetiver 20 years ago while exploring plants for coastal restoration projects. As Mr. Heumann learned more about the grass, he became enthralled -- and then

frustrated. "You just can't get anyone to believe all the things this plant does," he says.

Hurricane Katrina destroyed Mr. Heumann's greenhouses south of the city and flooded his land with saltwater for days. He says his vetiver grass was the only plant to survive.

Intrigued by its insect-repelling reputation, about 10 years ago Mr. Heumann tried dropping some chopped up roots on a swarm of termites. The next day, the termites were gone, he says, except for several dead ones. That's when he took the plants to Dr. Henderson, a leading expert on Formosan termites at LSU's AgCenter.

Over the years, Dr. Henderson and other scientists pinpointed a chemical in vetiver roots called nootkatone that's toxic to many insects, including termites. Several patents later, Dr. Henderson is conducting more experiments to prove his theory that vetiver grass can form an effective barrier to subterranean termites, and that it can thrive in a salty Gulf Coast environment.

Years before Katrina, Dr. Henderson warned that Formosan termites were invading trees growing along the levees, and even eating the sugar-cane-based seam-filling material in the concrete dike walls, which he believed weakened the protective system. Vetiver, he says, could not only provide erosion control and a breakwater barrier, but it could help ward off future termite infestations.

The Corps regards termites as only "a minor contributing factor" to



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levee failures, and officials remain wary that vetiver could prove to have downsides that outweigh its benefits.



Ahmad Evans

Vetiver grass grown in scientist Gregg Henderson's experiments.

Despite the government doubts, private landowners have begun to embrace vetiver grass.

Doug Terreson, an oil-industry analyst for Morgan Stanley in Houston, installed thousands of the plants along the shorefront of his property on Mobile Bay, Ala., after losing several feet to erosion from Hurricane Katrina. The grass was by far the cheapest solution he found to his erosion problem, costing \$2 to \$5 a plant, depending on the size. "They call it the soil nail," he said. "And that's what it is." Two months after planting the grass, "I couldn't pull it from the ground."

Earlier this month, Dr. Henderson and Mr. Heumann were invited to talk about vetiver grass to members of the Parkway Partners civic group. At a plant sale before their presentation, New Orleans homeowners snapped up pallets of the grass to plant around their houses.

"I've been a victim of termites -- twice," said Mary Lou Main, 80 years old. "I don't know if vetiver will stop them. But I do hope it will retard their progress."

**Write to** Susan Warren at [susan.warren@wsj.com](mailto:susan.warren@wsj.com)

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