



# Inverell Shire Council

NOXIOUS WEED CONTROL UNIT

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## Rock/Mulga Fern



Rock fern is a native plant. The plants are common, especially in granite and trap rock country. They grow in arid and non-arid areas, in exposed rocky habitats, in rock crevices or shelter of rocks, quite often in open grazing country. The delicate-looking plants look innocent, but they can be fatal to livestock!

### IDENTIFICATION

Rock fern (*Cheilanthes* spp.) is an "attractive" plant, as far as ferns go, with the typical reddish-brown stalks and bright green leaf. Plants vary between 10 and 30 cm in height. Rock fern favours the shelter of large rocks or logs, and can also be found hidden in amongst long grass. It is in this latter situation where stock are most likely to consume the fern as they graze.

### EFFECT ON ANIMALS

Livestock don't seem to deliberately seek out rock fern, but it can be consumed along with their other feed. It's possible the hard stalks are what do the damage, because they are wiry and difficult to digest. The poisoning process is very slow. For example, in 2003, rock fern species were found to be responsible for the deaths of thirty (30) head of cattle on

a property north of Bingara. Because the deaths occurred over a period of three (3) months, no-one suspected poisoning (by plants) at the time. The mystery was solved when examinations by a local veterinarian revealed the abundant presence of (reddish) fern stalks in the gut. A number of other stock deaths within Inverell Shire (Copeton, Gum Flat, Ashford, Bonshaw, Dumaresq River) have also been traced to rock/mulga fern.

Selwyn Everist's book "Poisonous Plants of Australia" states that "*mulga fern or rock fern poisonings occur when the fern is in a dry state and when little other feed is available.*"

*Effects on animals are worse if they are driven after eating the fern and if continued the animals usually die. The best option is to remove them from the paddock if possible.*

*To avoid losses, don't drive stock, don't allow access to paddocks with fern or if you must, remove them after 10 days grazing and place on other feed for three weeks before returning them for another ten days".*



NB Another rock fern warning sign, according to a local landholder in the Texas area, is that cattle that have been over-exposed to this plant will begin to pass blood in their urine.

***MORE INFORMATION? PLEASE CONTACT YOUR LOCAL WEEDS OFFICER:***

Les Tanner 02 6728 8284 - mobile 0427 241 806

Phil Sutton 02 6728 8244 - 0418 446 068

OR check out Council's website on [www.inverell.nsw.gov.au](http://www.inverell.nsw.gov.au), Environmental Services section

## LEGAL STATUS

Rock/Mulga fern is NOT a declared NOXIOUS WEED. There is therefore no legal requirement to control or otherwise remove it from your property.

## CONTROL METHODS

There are no satisfactory control methods. The reality is that rock/mulga fern is a prolific, naturally- occurring native plant - especially in sandy soils. You can't eradicate it. Your stock have to get used to living with it, and this is usually the case.

Photo, right: a thick patch of healthy rock fern on a property on Atholwood Road near Ashford. The ground is bare except for the rock fern and sheep droppings - obviously the rock fern is completely ignored by the sheep on this particular property...



## FINAL WORD OF CAUTION

Stock new to an infested paddock are most at risk, so remove them for a 3 weeks spell after 10 days so they can get the plant out of their system.

Be very aware that when moving stock that have been exposed to rock fern, they must not be "hurried". According to landholders who have lost animals to rock fern, "if you start to push them, they will just drop dead"!

**DISCLAIMER:** The information contained herein is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of writing. However, because of advances in knowledge, users are reminded of the need to ensure that information upon which they rely is up to date and to check currency of the information with the appropriate officer of Inverell Shire Council or the user's independent adviser.

(LRT 30/07/08)

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