

Profile of Ronny Groenteman

2011 recipient of the CAWS Early Career Weed Scientist Travel Award

I came to NZ from Israel, at the end of 2004, to do a PhD on biological control of nodding thistle at Canterbury University, Christchurch. I have been fortunate to gain employment in my field – classical weed biocontrol at Landcare Research, New Zealand. I'm part of a team that works on various weedy targets, mainly environmental weeds. My current main project is focused on aspects of the successful past biocontrol programme, against St. John's wort. This is an exciting opportunity to compare current, modern weed biocontrol risk assessment procedures, to what was acceptable at the time the programme ran, in the 1940s. Examination of the successful biocontrol agents, leaf-feeding beetles, showed that in the laboratory, they feed and complete development on indigenous plant species closely related to St. John's wort. Under current regulations we would not have introduced them to NZ, to avoid risking non-target damage to the indigenous species. However, it is difficult to find field evidence of such non-target effects, even after many decades of biocontrol agent's activity. The great challenge now is to make inferences to future programmes and find methods to identify false effects of biocontrol candidates feeding on non-target hosts in the laboratory, in quarantine. Identifying false effects is important if we want to make sure we don't risk rejecting agents with great potential to be both safe and effective.

I find the work on classical weed biocontrol rewarding, and offering a good balance between fascinating science and its practical application.

I will be using the CAWS Travel Award to attend the XIII International Symposium on Biological Control of Weeds in Hawai'i in September 2011. This is the best international platform to present my work, and the most important gathering for anyone involved in weed biocontrol.

