

# outbursts

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spotlight on invasive plant management

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## Saving Ethiopian farmlands

*Virginia Tech partners to battle a dangerous plant invasion*

*Photos and story by Keith Pierce*



*An Ethiopian woman walks past the future site of a new Integrated Pest Management lab where biocontrol agents for Parthenium, an invasive weed, will be raised and prepped for release.*



*Virginia Tech entomologist Muni Muniappan, director of the IPM Innovation lab, examines a Parthenium plant for signs of a stem-boring weevil in the hope that it is effectively attacking the invasive weed. Parthenium has spread its destruction in Australia and countries in Africa and Asia as well.*

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One of the world's most invasive weeds may have met its match. *Parthenium hysterophorus*, a species of flowering plant in the aster family, made its way from the Americas to Africa, Australia and Asia beginning in the 1970s. Scientists have dubbed it the "worst weed of the century."

The weed, also known as famine weed and congress weed, destroys native crops, causes allergic rashes and illnesses in people, and scars the intestines of animals that eat it. Scientists plan to release two biocontrol agents – a leaf-feeding beetle and a stem-boring weevil – in Ethiopia's infested areas.

Scientists, farmers, government policymakers and students gathered in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia, roughly 275 miles northeast of Addis Ababa, the country's capital, for a Virginia Tech-led workshop in December 2015 to learn about the aggressive weed's spread and ways to control it.

The project involves researchers from Virginia Tech and Virginia State University along with partners from South Africa. The \$748,465 grant, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), underwrites efforts in four eastern African countries – Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda – through November 2019.



En route to Dire Dawa, Muniappan stops at a small garden to examine tomato plants for signs of infestation by the tomato leafminer pest.



Dennis Treacy, left, president, Smithfield Foundation (then executive vice president and chief sustainability officer at Smithfield Foods) and a member of the Virginia Tech Board of Visitors, joined Virginia Tech researchers in Ethiopia in December to learn about IPM programs in Africa. Here, a farmer in Dire Dawa gives him an up-close look at the plant also known as famine weed.



Above, farmers make their way to the fields. Below left, Ethiopian farmland west of Dire Dawa, one of only two chartered cities in Ethiopia, where the *Parthenium* workshop took place.



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