



Public Lands Foundation

Western Wildlife and Ranchland damaged by Weed Explosion

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A biological disaster is in the making on the Public Lands of the West. It is a disaster that is also damaging private lands, and it poses potentially staggering losses to economic values as well as to wildlife resources and the productive biological diversity of the Public Lands. The impact is coming from a quietly insidious explosion of invasive non-native weeds that are spreading at alarming rates across public and private lands in the West, replacing native vegetation; destroying land productivity and wildlife habitat; endangering plant and animal species; and changing diverse ecosystems into permanently degraded monocultures of weeds that, in many cases, remain biological wastelands.

Spotted knapweed infestations in Montana and Idaho reduce elk forage on winter ranges from 50 to 90 percent. Today, there are about five million acres of knapweed-infested lands, and the weed is also expanding rapidly in Oregon and California. Leafy spurge causes severe eye irritation and possible blindness in humans, is poisonous to cattle, and eliminates wildlife forage. Leafy spurge has dropped the value of some ranches in Oregon by 60 to 80 percent. Yellow starthistle, which infests the habitat of sage grouse, chukar, and many native birds and small mammals, now covers more than 20 million acres of private and public land in California, Oregon, Washington and Idaho. There are many other introduced weed species, like rush skeletonweed and salt cedar, that are out of control throughout the West.

The impacts of these invasive weeds are extensive and severe. Wildlife habitat deteriorates, forest regeneration and production are impaired, grazing capacity is commonly reduced dramatically, recreation opportunities are reduced, water quantity and quality decrease, and biological diversity diminishes.

Unlike wildfires, which are dramatic events that generate huge public concern and immediate government suppression action, weed invasions are quiet, slow motion explosions that, historically, neither the public nor the government have recognized until it is too late and too expensive to control or manage the problem.

Today, nearly 10 percent of the BLM lands and their resources in the West, excluding Alaska, is affected by invasive weeds. In some cases of massive infestation, containment is the best that can be hoped for, but, in many places, new and spreading infestations can be controlled and stopped - if sufficient efforts are put in place quickly.

BLM is a large landowner in the West that has the land base, the mission, the organization and management structure, and the potential funding to do something about the problem, but funding and priority for BLM's weed control efforts is lagging behind what is needed. Other public agencies, both Federal and State are undertaking weed control efforts. Cooperative Weed Management Areas have been

formed in some areas, and substantial State and private funding has been used to good effect in some localities. But weed control can only be effective when all land owners work together, and BLM must play a larger role in this effort if there is any hope of controlling this "biological wildfire" before millions more acres are infested and wildlife values lost.

The Public Lands Foundation (PLF) strongly endorses the BLM's "Partners Against Weeds" action plan for bringing together Federal, State and local governments, private land owners, public land interest groups and volunteers to help prevent the spread of invasive weeds. The program objectives are to recognize and quickly eliminate new weed infestations; concentrate on removal of small patches and isolated infestations; and attempt to contain heavily infested areas. BLM needs to be able to lead, encourage and assist local governments and local publics, since they are the ones that can best mobilize and sustain the efforts of controlling and eliminating invasive, non-native weeds.

A Presidential Executive Order was signed in February 1999, calling for increased national attention and coordination on the control of invasive weeds. Congress is considering urgently needed legislation, House Bill 1492, the "Harmful Nonnative Weed Control Act of 2001."

PLF urges the Department of the Interior and the Congress to take action while there is still time, and urges other public land interest organizations and user groups to join with PLF in supporting aggressive action on invasive weed prevention and control programs.

PRIORITY ACTION BY CONGRESS AND THE BLM IS URGENTLY NEEDED!

ISSUE

Non-native weeds are invading the wild lands of the West at an alarming rate, and are destroying the productivity and devastating the wildlife habitat and native plant communities on millions of acres of public and private lands. The issue is how to get the public agency and Congressional weed priorities raised to a level that is commensurate with the threat so action can be taken in time to contain the spread of these invasive weeds.

BACKGROUND

Thousands of watersheds in the West are rapidly undergoing the greatest permanent land degradations in their recorded history due to the damage being inflicted by invasive, noxious weeds. Invasive, noxious weeds are plant species which are non-native to the ecosystems and whose introduction is likely to cause economic or environmental harm, or harm to human health.

Many of these plants have been brought into this country inadvertently over that past century from Eurasia with shipments of other products. Freed from the natural enemies in their homelands, these aggressive plants have flourished in new environments where they can outcompete native plants on the public and private wildlands of the American West. They get footholds on both public and private lands where the vegetative cover has been damaged or destroyed by wildfire or surface

disturbance, such as roadbuilding, off road vehicle use, overgrazing, logging, mining, rights of way, etc., and then the weed seeds are spread by animals, birds, vehicles, wind, water, and people to larger areas and new locations.

Some examples:

- There were only minor populations of spotted knapweed in Montana in 1920. Today, there are about five million acres of knapweed-infested lands, and the weed is also expanding rapidly in Idaho, Oregon and California.

- From just a few plants in western Idaho in 1954, rush skeletonweed now infests over four million acres as it continues to "leapfrog" to the east, now out beyond Shoshone, and to the west into the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area in Oregon and Idaho. Severe infestations are also spreading in California, Washington and other parts of Oregon

- In 1970, there were about 32 acres of leafy spurge in the Theodore Roosevelt National Park in North Dakota. Today, leafy spurge dominates 4,000 acres of the park, and there are over one million acres of leafy spurge in North Dakota, 600,000 acres in Montana and extensive infestations continuing to spread in Wyoming, Idaho and Oregon.

- In 1993, Jackson County in southern Oregon and Umatilla County in northeastern Oregon both reported explosions of yellow starthistle with over 100,000 acres in Jackson County and 200,000 acres in Umatilla County. After 7 years, these populations had doubled! Similarly, about 30% of the BLM land in the Cottonwood Field Office Area of northern Idaho is infested with yellow starthistle.

These examples involve only four of the many invasive weed species. Estimates vary, but it is apparent that weed invasions are expanding onto several thousands of acres per day of BLM public lands in the western states outside of Alaska. The impacts of these invasive weeds are extensive and severe. Wildlife habitat deteriorates, forest regeneration and production are diminished, grazing capacity is commonly reduced dramatically, recreation opportunities are reduced, water quantity and quality decrease, and biological diversity is impaired.

Wildlife habitat is suffering the greatest loss from the massive spread of weeds because these aggressive plants take over and replace existing vegetative communities and commonly grow into near monocultures, creating what some have called "biological wastelands" in many areas.

Vegetative monocultures are unfit for most wildlife species because each species of wildlife has its own specific micro habitat requirements for food and cover, so the vegetative community needs to be diverse to support a full complement of wildlife.

For example: - elk, deer and bighorn sheep which graze the grasslands are finding themselves without winter range. Small mammals that inhabit the grasslands, and feeding raptors and snakes disappear. Chukar and sage grouse populations are declining because of lost habitat in other areas.

Aggressive weed invasions destroy native vegetative communities as well as wildlife habitat. Weeds crowd out and shade out native plants and steal their water.

Weeds don't get the public attention that wildfires do. Wildfires are quick and dramatic events that generate huge public concern and immediate government suppression action. In contrast, weed invasions are quiet, slow motion explosions that, historically, neither the public nor the government have recognized or responded to until it is too late to control or manage the problem. What usually happens is that a few weeds at the start of an invasion are either overlooked or considered insignificant. By the time the problem is big enough to get people's attention, the weeds have taken over the land and it is no longer economically feasible to control them.

The loss of wildlife habitat to urban expansion and other human activities is a major and ongoing public controversy throughout the West. Meanwhile, invasive weeds are unobtrusively destroying wildlife habitat at the rate of several thousand acres per day on BLM lands alone, almost as completely as if the lands were clear cut, strip-mined or put into residential subdivisions; and the general public and most of the conservation/environmental organizations and public land user groups do not appear to know or care!

Fortunately, the Bureau of Land Management does care and is trying to do something about it. While weeds have invaded about 10 million acres of BLM lands, more than 90% of the 180 million acres of BLM lands outside of Alaska are relatively uninfested. Also fortunate is the fact that the BLM is the one "landowner's in the West that has the land base, the "health of the land" mission, the organization and management structure, and the funding potential to do something about the problem.

In January 1996, the BLM issued a "Partners Against Weeds - An Action Plan for the Bureau of Land Management". It outlines strategies for the wildland weed management process and contains guidelines for organizations who want to help support the prevention and control of invasive weeds.

Its goals are:

- Diverse, healthy, and productive native plant communities for quality wildlife habitat, and
- Keeping relatively uninfested lands and waters from becoming seriously infested with invasive exotic plants.

Its priorities are:

- Stopping the spread of weeds to uninfested lands,
- Concentrating on eliminating small patches and isolated infestations of weeds, and
- Containing heavily-weed invested areas.

Its process is:

- Inventorying the invasion and potential invasion areas.
- Detecting and eradicating new infestations.

- Restoring sites as needed.
- Making invasive weed management an organizational priority.
- Designating someone in each Field Office to lead the program, and to encourage the incorporation of weed management considerations into all resource programs.

"Partnerships" is a key ingredient of the plan, because weed invasions are not a phenomena limited to public lands; they are on all land ownerships, especially where lands have been disturbed and openings have been created for the invasions to occur.

Since the issuance of the "Partners Against Weeds" action plan, there has been a small, but aggressive, effort by the BLM to "sound the alarm". Those who hear the message invariably agree that "something ought to be done", and there have been some weed management success stories. However, in many BLM Field Offices, the various weed management activities are only in the beginning stages of development. During two recent evaluations, Field Office personnel indicated that they felt the level of weed management was only about one third of what is needed. Consequently, Field Offices commonly report that over 70 percent of the weed infestations are growing out of control. Without prompt increased investments in weed management, many more vast areas will become permanently degraded.

Invasive weed management is an unglamorous program that attracts little interest or priority from top management in government and in the Congress, primarily because the general public, the public land user groups and the conservation/environmental interest groups have expressed little concern over the issue. The long-standing dilemma continues - invasive weeds are not a problem until they are a problem, and by then it is commonly too late to do much about them.

PLF POSITION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Invasive weeds are spreading across the wildlands of the West at alarming rates, changing the native vegetative communities in ways that are destroying millions of acres of wildlife habitat and significantly reducing the health and productivity of both public and private lands.

The PLF strongly endorses the weed management goals and strategies outlined in "Partners Against Weeds - An Action Plan for the Bureau of Land Management" which the BLM issued in January, 1996, and the priorities of stopping the spread to uninfested areas, concentrating on eradication of small patches and isolated infestations, and containing heavily infested areas.

The PLF believes that the BLM is the key "landlord" in the West that has land base, the "health of the land" mission, the organizational structure, the management ability, and the potential funding to be able to be the catalyst for cooperation and action on this problem that is so dramatically impacting both public and private lands. The BLM needs to be able to lead, encourage and assist local governments and local publics, as they are the ones who can best mobilize and sustain the efforts of controlling and eliminating invasive, non-native weeds. Increased public and Congressional awareness, concern and support are the key to the success of the BLM's weed management efforts.

PLF needs to show its concern and support to local, State and National BLM managers. PLF needs to help BLM get the message out to public land user groups and conservation/environmental interest groups and organizations through such means as National Public Lands Day activities, the PLF's National Advisory Council, "The Public Lands Monitor", and budget testimony before Congressional Committees.

The conservation/environmental community and public land user groups are going to have to demand that weed management be raised from the level of a legitimate activity to one of the top priority activities within the BLM's recreation, wilderness, wildlife, forestry, range management, fire, minerals, and road and recreation maintenance programs, not to "build a weed program", but to maintain or enhance these programs.

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Position Statement: PS 20-01