



## **Public Lands Foundation**

# **Western Wildlands Damaged by the Explosion of Invasive Plants (Weeds)**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

A biological disaster is in the making on the public lands in the west. The impact is coming from an explosion of invasive plants and noxious weeds which are nonnative to the natural ecosystems and are likely to cause long-term economic or environmental harm. Invasive plants include not only noxious weeds, but also other plant species that are not native to this country or to the area where they are growing. The impacts of these invasive plants are extensive and severe. Wildlife habitat deteriorates, forest regeneration and production are impaired, grazing capacity is reduced dramatically, recreation opportunities are reduced, water quantity and quality decrease, biological diversity diminishes and increases fire frequency. Unlike wildfires, which are dramatic events that generate huge public concern and immediate government suppression action, invasive plant infestations 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. Invasive plants are introduced and spread by wildfire, combined with surface disturbance activities such as roadbuilding, off- road vehicle use, overgrazing, logging, mining, rights-of-way development, etc. Weed seeds are spread by animals, birds, vehicles, wind, water, and people, leading to the establishment of invasive plants. The changing climate is exacerbating the problem making more lands susceptible to the spread.

Some 79 million acres or nearly 32 percent of the BLM-managed public lands in the west, including Alaska, are infested with invasive plants. 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, but only if increased efforts are put in place immediately. While invasive plants have impacted substantial acres of BLM managed public lands, fortunately more than 68 percent of public lands outside of Alaska are relatively uninfested. BLM is a major "landowner" in the west that has the land base, the "health of the land" mission, and the organization and management structure to do something about the problem and is working to protect the uninfested lands. Unfortunately, funding availability and agency support for BLM's invasive plant control program lags behind control efforts by other Federal, State, and other public agencies. Weeds spread across the landscape without regard to land ownerships, and the problem must be addressed by a strong and well-financed interagency approach. The PLF urges the Department of the Interior and the Congress to take immediate action while there is still time to act and urges other public land interest organizations and user groups to join with the PLF in supporting aggressive action on invasive plant prevention and control programs.

## **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 plants. Estimates vary, but it is apparent that invasive plant invasions are expanding onto several thousands of acres per day of BLM-managed public lands in the western states, outside of Alaska. The BLM uses a widely accepted Integrated Pest Management (IPM) approach to manage and control federal or state listed noxious weeds and non-listed invasive plants. This emphasizes prevention and early detection, coupled with a combination of chemical, mechanical, manual, biological, and cultural controls such as targeted grazing strategies to control cheatgrass to reduce the rate of spread of wildfires.

Invasive annual grasses have been a significant and growing problem for decades. Downy brome (Cheatgrass) which infests the habitat of sage grouse, chukar, and many native birds and small mammals, has impacted over 307 million acres (USDA Forest Service) in the Great Basin, Columbia Basin, and Snake River Plains of Nevada, Utah, Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, while also infesting 50 million acres of BLM managed public lands. Cheatgrass is a non-native grass that is extremely flammable when cured, the primary contributor of fuels for many of the large range fires in the Great Basin states. It is spreading as an opportunistic invader on disturbed or burned land and is ultimately able to out compete native vegetation for water and resources. Although a poor forage for livestock in the winter or spring, it is very responsive to winter and spring moisture, and when dominant it forms a monoculture that has little utility for wildlife or livestock. The invasion of cheatgrass and resulting habitat loss is contributory to the sage grouse's risk of being listed as a Threatened and Endangered Species. The cost to suppress cheatgrass fueled fires is in the millions of dollars, as is the cost to rehabilitate burned lands. Adding to those costs are the impacts to rangeland users, whether on public, state, or private rangelands.

Difficulties arise in rehabilitating burned rangelands where medusahead, an invader from the Mediterranean, grows in combination with cheatgrass. An additional challenge facing the BLM is ventenata, an emerging annual grass, that has been declared a noxious weed in some Western states. It has no value and constitutes an additional fire risk.

In 2015, the Soda Fire in Idaho consumed over 280,000 acres of rangeland requiring reseeding of over 160,000 acres with 2.4 million pounds of various seeds. The primary fuels were cheatgrass, medusahead, and native grasses and sagebrush. The impacts of this fire were dramatic - impacting local ranchers losing forage for years, and wildlife habitat taking years to recover. Thankfully, the fire rehabilitation efforts have been successful. Similarly, yellow starthistle infested about 30 percent of the BLM-managed public land in the Cottonwood Field Office Area of northern Idaho. Today, common crupina, a state and federal listed noxious weed is invading those areas and is harder to control. These examples involve only four of the many invasive plant species.

## **DISCUSSION**

BLM Field Offices commonly report that over 70 percent of the invasive plant infestations are growing out of control. The BLM is trying to do something about it. The BLM has partnered with the ninety-five existing Cooperative Weed Management Areas (CWMA's) in those states that they currently collaborate with and helped form new CWMA's in those states where they do not exist. Substantial State and private funding is being used to good effect in some localities, but invasive plant control can only be effective when all land owners work together. In January 1996, the BLM issued a "Partners Against Weeds (PAW) - An Action Plan for the Bureau of Land Management". The plan outlines strategies for wildland invasive plant management and contains guidelines for organizations who want to help support the prevention and control of invasive plants. The goals are to maintain diverse, healthy and productive native plant communities, and keep relatively uninfested lands and waters from becoming seriously infested with invasive plants. Its priorities are educating public land users regarding the impacts, prevention and stopping the spread; concentrating on controlling and managing small patches and isolated infestations; and containing heavily infested areas. Its process is to inventory the invasion, detect and respond early to eradicate new invasions, restore sites as needed, and designate someone in each BLM Field Office to lead the program and incorporate invasive plant management considerations into all resource programs.

"Partnerships" are a key ingredient of the plan because invasive plant invasions are not a phenomenon limited to public lands. They impact 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 needs to be done, and there have been some weed management success stories. The absence of the National Weed and Invasive Species program leader in Washington D.C. leaves a gaping hole at the national level, with no one able to convey that message and collaborate with other federal agencies, NGO's, and private organizations. The most critical loss is the BLM's voice for the public lands and influence in developing national budget, policy, and strategy for weeds and invasive species that will affect the public lands.

Congress has taken some initial steps to help address this problem. Senate bill S.1264, the Resiliency for Ranching and Natural Conservation Health Act, was introduced on April 21, 2021. It would ensure funding of a Range Betterment Account to support weed control measures and treatments, seeding and reseeded, and rangeland improvement projects as an amendment of Section 401 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976.

## **PLF POSITION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Invasive plants are invading the wild lands of the west at an alarming rate and devastating the wildlife habitat and native plant communities on millions of acres of public and private lands each year. The issue is how to get the BLM and Congress to recognize invasive plants as a priority that must be raised to a level that is commensurate with the threat, so action can be taken in time to contain further introduction and spread of these invasive plants.

- The PLF strongly endorses the IPM 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 education and awareness, preventing the introduction and stopping the spread to uninfested areas, detecting infestations immediately, concentrating on eradication of small patches and isolated infestations, and containing heavily infested areas.
- The PLF believes that the BLM is a key "landlord" in the west, which has a "health of the land" mission, the organizational structure, and the management ability to address the weed problem. However, it does not have the funding and staffing necessary 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 encourage and assist local governments and local publics, as they and other Federal land management agencies work to mobilize and sustain the efforts of controlling and eliminating invasive plants. Increased public and Congressional awareness, concern and support are the key to the success of the BLM's invasive plant management efforts. Coordination of policies and funding among Federal land management agencies and BLMs ability to increase the Congressional awareness of the problem have been undermined by the decision to relocate BLM leadership away from Washington, DC.
- The PLF is willing to help the 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 newsletter and other social media releases, and budget testimony before Congressional Committees. The conservation/environmental community and public land user groups need to demand that invasive plant management be fully funded, staffed, and elevated 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 recreation maintenance programs.
- The PLF believes the BLM should support the passage of Senate bill S.1264, the Resiliency for Ranching and Natural Conservation Health Act, to ensure there is funding for weed management activities.

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