Position Statement

Western Lands Damaged by the Spread of Invasive Plants (Weeds)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A significant problem is in the making on public lands in the West. The impact is coming from the spread 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, costly and severe, and they occur across all land ownerships and management jurisdictions. 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 fire frequency increases. Unlike wildfires, which are dramatic events that generate huge public concern and immediate government suppression action, invasive plant infestations are quiet, slow-motion events that, historically, neither the public nor the government have recognized until it is too late and too expensive to control or manage the problem. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) must continue to utilize its resources, and to enlist the partnership of other agencies and the public in addressing this critical threat to public land health. The PLF believes the Department of the Interior and Congress need to take immediate action to address this problem while there is still time to act.

BACKGROUND

The threat of, and subsequent costs to prevent or manage the impacts of invasive plants has been growing exponentially across the United States. The Science of the Total Environment (Volume 806, Part 3, 1 February 2022) evaluated the economic costs of biological invasions in the United States from 1960 to 2020, and reported the costs were at least $1.22 trillion. Annual costs associated with this problem increased from $2 billion in 1960–69 to $21 billion in 2010–20. This includes all taxonomy – invasive plants, insects, animals, etc. From 1960 to 2020, reported costs totaled $4.52 trillion (USD 2017); based on highly reliable costs figures, this total cost reached $1.22 trillion with an average annual cost of $19.94 billion/year. Amazingly these costs increased from $2 billion annually between 1960 and 1969 to $21.08 billion annually between 2010 and 2020. Most costs (73%) were related to resource damages and losses ($896.22 billion), as opposed to management expenditures ($46.54 billion). Moreover, the majority of costs were reported by invaders from terrestrial habitats ($643.51 billion, 53%) and agriculture was the most impacted sector ($509.55 billion).

Over 79 million acres or 32 percent of the BLM-managed public lands in the West, including Alaska, are infested with invasive plants. In some cases where there is massive infestation, containment is the best that can be hoped for, but in many places new and spreading infestations can be controlled and stopped. However, this is only possible if increased efforts and resources are put in place. While invasive plants have impacted substantial acres of BLM-managed public lands, fortunately more than 68 percent of public lands outside of Alaska remain-uninfested. The BLM is a major landowner in the West that has the land base, the multiple use and sustained yield mission, and the organization and management structure to do something about the problem and is working to protect those public lands that are not infested with invasive plants. That said, in FY 24, the BLM spent over $62 million on the control and management of weeds and invasive species (including fuels control) on BLM administered lands. The total spent on weeds and invasive plants includes inventory and monitoring in addition to the treatments. Unfortunately, this level of funding is woefully inadequate, and agency support for BLM's invasive plant control program continues to fall behind efforts by other Federal, State, and other public agencies. Meanwhile, invasive plant populations continue to expand across the landscape without regard to land ownership, and the problem must be addressed by a strong and well-financed interagency approach. The BLM must work with other public land interest organizations and user groups to support aggressive action on invasive plant prevention, control, and management programs.

An example of the serious impacts of the expansion of invasive weeds on the landscape occurred 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 – local ranchers lost forage for years, and wildlife habitat took years to recover. The BLM's rehabilitation efforts have been successful. In 2025, BLM field crews will conduct their 10-year monitoring studies to evaluate the success of the long-term rehabilitation efforts of the 2015 Soda Fire. Hopefully the agency will be able to identify lessons learned and develop strategies to help it manage this problem going forward.

Similarly, yellow starthistle continues to infest more than 30 percent of the BLM-managed public lands 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 are just a few examples of the many invasive plant species adversely affecting BLM lands.

The BLM currently partners with 206 Coordinated Weed Management Areas (CWMA's), coordinated weed demonstration areas, and other partnerships in sixteen states, and continues to help form new CWMA's in those states where they do not exist. Substantial State and private funding is also being used in some localities, and have a beneficial effect, but invasive plant control can only be effective when all landowners work together

Partnerships are a key ingredient in BLM's ability to control and manage invasive plant invasions. Invasive plants have an impact on all land ownerships, especially where land has been disturbed, and openings have been created for the invasions to occur. Through its coordinated efforts with CWMAs, state, federal, and other agencies, the BLM has led an aggressive effort to sound the alarm about the threat of invasive plants. All invariably agree that something needs to be done and that it will require a unified approach. Something that would help bring support would be to identify areas where the work that was done got positive results. There are many such weed management success stories, but there is so much more that needs to be accomplished and many more success stories that need to be told.

In 2019, members of state, federal and non-government agencies gathered to address the challenges and barriers created by the establishment and expansion of invasive plant species in the West. They developed the Western Weed Action Plan, which is a strategic action plan built on a framework supported by the following pillars: funding, policy and regulation, coordination, collaboration and data sharing, and research and reporting — each supported with subsequent actions and sub actions that address invasive weed expansion, especially into the sagebrush biome.

PLF POSITION

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 BLM needs to continue to engage the public, other agencies and landowners, and Congress regarding the fact that invasive plants are a problem 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.

1. The PLF believes the BLM is a key landowner in the West, which has a multiple use and sustained yield mission, the organizational structure, and the management ability to address the weed problem. However, the BLM continues to lack 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 to control and eliminate invasive plants. Increased public and Congressional awareness, concern and support are the key to the success of BLM's invasive plant management efforts. Coordination of policies and funding among Federal land management agencies and BLM's ability to increase the Congressional awareness of the problem should continue to be a high priority for the BLM.

2. 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 maintenance programs.

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