

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands

Testimony

STATEMENT OF UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

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HEARING BEFORE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS AND PUBLIC LANDS

COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

CONCERNING

NOXIOUS WEEDS AND INVASIVE PLANTS

June 24, 1999

Mr. Chairman, members of the subcommittee, I appreciate having the opportunity to appear before you on the subject of invasive plants, specifically noxious weeds. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) welcomes Congressional interest in invasive plants and we look forward to working with the members of this Committee on this important issue.

Invasive plants have been called non-natives, exotics, aliens, weeds, and a host of other names. BLM defines invasive plants as plants that have been introduced into an environment in which they did not evolve and thus have no natural enemies to limit their reproduction. Whether plants are transported across an ocean to a new country or across a mountain range into a new valley, there is always the potential that they will locate to another habitat that will encourage their fast growth and high reproductive rates allowing them to "invade" their new habitats.

Invasive plants from non-native sources affect us all. Whether we live on a farm, in the suburbs, or in the city, invasive nonnative plants affect our lives. Most infestations threaten the productivity of rangelands, wildlife habitat, and adjacent agricultural land. They occur on many public land areas throughout the western United States, and pose health hazards to grazing animals.

Weed infestations from non-native plants are spreading at a high rate. In fact, they represent the most rapidly accelerating threat to the long-term health of our nation's public lands. Non-native weeds have invaded approximately 17 million acres of public rangelands in the West. Untreated, the rate of spread can increase exponentially.

Consider the following effects of non-native plants on various regions of the country:

- In Utah, Squarrose knapweed has spread from a few plants in 1954 to cover 140,000 acres in 1996.
- Medusahead has seen explosive spread in western public land states within the last ten years. First discovered in northern Utah about 5 years ago, it is now crossing the northern border of the state.
- In northern California, yellow starthistle has spread from one to 10 million acres in just 15 years.
- In Idaho, rush skeletonweed has spread from 40 acres to 4 million acres from 1964 to 1995.

- In Colorado, spotted knapweed, leafy spurge and Canada thistle now occupy over 1 million acres of land where 18 years ago there were minimal infestations.

A few examples to illustrate the harmful impacts of weed infestations on the public lands include:

- Economic effects: Weeds from non-native plants affect local communities financially by reducing opportunities for public land recreation. Weeds reduce land values and cause damaging economic impacts to local communities. Their economic impact has been estimated to exceed \$35 billion annually.
- Each year for example, weeds reduce yields of Utah's eight leading crops by an amount valued in excess of \$34 million.
- In Klamath County, Oregon, a 1,300-acre ranch was recently abandoned due to infestations of leafy spurge, and was sold at auction for about ten percent of its pre-infestation value.
- Leafy spurge on grazing and wild lands in Montana, Wyoming, and the Dakotas counts for \$129 million negative impact annually and represents a potential loss of 1,433 jobs.
 - Weeds have caused the abandonment of wild land recreation sites and trails. Hunters and bird dogs are reluctant to use land infested with thistles, and weeds diminish the enjoyment of recreationists near established BLM campgrounds.
- Native Plant communities: Non-native plants displace native plants and can spread quickly into natural areas, monopolize resources, and push out native flora and fauna.
- Wildlife habitat: Americans place a great deal of importance on the ability of public lands to provide quality wildlife habitat. Recent studies published in *Science* and *Bioscience* have shown that non-native species are the single biggest cause of species endangerment in the United States. The proliferation of non-native plants is particularly problematic, and is starting to affect valuable big game species in addition to many endangered species. Studies in Montana, for example, show that spotted knapweed invasions reduced available winter forage for elk by fifty to ninety percent.
- Ecosystem function: Natural fire regimes can be altered by weed infestations. An invasive plant community will have different fuel characteristics which affect how often and the rate at which an area will burn. Soil, the basic building block of all vegetative communities, can be altered chemically by invasive plant litter. Salt cedar litter contains enough salt to increase soil salinity to a point where native plants cannot survive. Erosion, another impact of invasive weeds, is due to non-soil binding tap rooted weeds replacing native fibrous rooted grasses.

To be fully successful in the fight against non-native invasive plants, any effort must bring together a complex set of stakeholders that include government agencies, private land owners, and industry. One of the first challenges -- and perhaps a prerequisite to success -- is to increase public awareness of this issue. A further challenge is to focus public and private resources in partnership to deal with specific non-native weed species problems while prevention and control remain economically feasible.

Although our BLM budget for weed management has increased slightly over the past several years, its present level at \$3.7 million is not adequate to prevent and control the spread of invasive plants and noxious weeds. Despite this fact, the BLM has emerged as a leader in the fight against non-native weeds on public lands. In 1996, the BLM completed "*Partners Against Weeds*", which outlines a widely accepted invasive weed management strategy. I have listed in Appendix "A", for the record, specific examples of cooperative partnerships in the fight against non-native weeds.

Some examples of cooperative non-native weed control efforts among private parties, state officials, and BLM include the following:

- Last Spring in Juab County, Utah, a BLM seasonal-spray crew spent two weeks treating thousands of Scotch thistle plants in an area that had burned the previous summer. In late May of this year BLM staff found only a dozen plants. The successful control of this weed, in this area was a result of vigilance and timing. Had they missed this window of opportunity last year, repeated control measures would have been required for the next 20 years. This project saved the BLM thousands of dollars.
- Again in central Utah, during the "Cove Fort Weed Day", the BLM, and several hundred high school and

middle school students volunteer to dig thistle. The result of their efforts has been an increase in the quality of elk habitat within Millard county.

- Four high school students from Columbus, Montana, along with their Vocational-Agriculture instructor, successfully introduced the use of the horned beetle to reduce the spread of leafy spurge. Starting with a modest 200 beetles, the students successfully reproduced millions of insects. This project is believed to be the only one that has succeeded in reproducing these beetles in large numbers.
- In Montrose, Colorado, the BLM and the Sierra Club have received national recognition for their weed partnership. Members from across the country pay money to attend a service vacation where they work along the Dolores River, digging and pulling non-native weed species from some of the most heavily used boating stops along the river.

In support of its goal to increase the acreage treated to control non-native weeds in 1999 by 40 percent, the BLM is treating weeds using an integrated management approach. This method uses chemical, cultural, biological, and mechanical means in an integrated approach on nearly 300,000 acres. By the end of the year 2000, the BLM anticipates being able to inventory a total of 7 million acres of public land for weed occurrence. In addition, the BLM plans to fund new cooperative weed management projects in each of the public land states. BLM Field Offices have submitted approximately 200 detailed proposals for high priority work in their states. Available resources for this effort in 1999 have been directed toward the following areas:

- Weed Pilot Projects - Weed pilot projects are cooperative partnership efforts to help prevent the spread of weeds at the local community level.
- Weed Prevention and Early Detection - Development of strategies for educating, preventing, and early detection of new infestations.
- Control Treatments - A successful weed management program must include aggressive control measures.
- Inventory - To find new infestations, vegetative inventories are needed. Cooperative inventories involving State, local and private partners continue throughout the areas BLM manages. These partners improve the cooperative relationships needed to combat a common problem which crosses ownership boundaries. By the end of 1999, the BLM seeks to have cooperative management agreements for the control of invasive weeds in place with 46 percent of the counties that have invasive weed programs.

President Clinton's Executive Order on invasive species (E.O. 13112, February 3, 1999) establishes a framework in the fight against weeds and other invasive species. This Executive Order calls for a coordinated federal effort and the creation of an Invasive Species Council and an advisory committee comprised of non-federal stakeholders that will develop, by September, 2000, a comprehensive plan to address the growing economic and environmental threat. Additionally S.910, "The Noxious Weed Coordination and Plant Protection Act", recently introduced, along with an amendment codifying the entire Executive Order on invasive species, by Senator Craig and supported by the administration, would strengthen our authority to protect native plant species. The increasing awareness and understanding of this growing problem by legislators at the national level, is welcomed by the BLM.

In conclusion, the BLM is working with other federal, state, local, and tribal governments and with private landowners to keep relatively uninfested land from becoming seriously infested. Future generations of Americans deserve to inherit ecologically healthy and productive wild lands, not vast landscapes infested with non-native weed species that make the public lands unfit for people, livestock, and native wildlife. We must be committed to implementing weed partnerships so that the spread of non-native weeds can be prevented or controlled.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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