

IDAHo DECLARES WAR ON NOXIOUS WEEDS

Weed Awareness Week highlights need for ongoing noxious and invasive weeds battle

Idahoans who walk barefoot, ride a bike, or drive a car down a dirt road soon learn that goat heads are a problem here. But they're not the only problem. Noxious weeds of all sorts proliferate in Idaho. State law established 33 Cooperative Weed Management Areas to control noxious weeds with herbicides, biocontrols and public education and outreach efforts. But there are new noxious weeds emerging, and funding to fight them is slipping. In recognition of the importance of this battle, this issue of **Conservation the Idaho Way** highlights the efforts of two conservation districts addressing noxious weed and invasive species issues in opposite corners of the state - goat heads in Owyhee County and phragmites in the Bear Lake region.

When Representative Mat Erpelding sponsored House Bill 329 in the Idaho Legislature this year to officially designate the third week of May as "Idaho Weed Awareness Week", his goal was to heighten awareness of noxious weeds' broad impacts to all of Idaho's private lands, public lands and waters – urban and rural. His new law and a governor's proclamation both underscore and legitimize the campaign to fight noxious weeds. This year the week will occur on May 19-23.

"Now this week is something that weed awareness groups can plan on," Erpelding says.

"This week shall serve as a week to educate Idaho's citizens about the serious impacts of noxious and invasive plants and their direct impacts to Idaho's economy, waters, lands and agriculture," the



Helicopter sprays invasive phragmites on the edge of Bear Lake in Southeast Idaho. The Bear Lake Soil and Water Conservation District assists the local weed management area with phragmites control efforts, hoping to nip the problem in the bud.

legislation says. "Those entities already tasked with promoting noxious and invasive weed control and education and outreach are encouraged to lead the charge in celebrating Idaho Weed Awareness Week and educating Idaho's citizens to help stop the spread of noxious and invasive weeds."

Idaho has 65 listed noxious weeds statewide. Erpelding was inspired to get involved in the issue by seeing the spread of puncture vine, or "goat-heads," in the Boise Foothills. Puncture vine is an ubiquitous noxious weed that has large seeds with spikes on them that cause flat tires and damage to agricultural areas. It also spreads easily, which is why the Owyhee Soil and Water Conservation District has been working on the issue with the Northwest Owyhee Cooperative Weed

Management Area.

"It's a weed that shows how the land in both rural and urban areas can be affected" Erpelding says.

The Owyhee Soil and Water Conservation District has been active in controlling puncture vine since 2009. The Northwest Owyhee Cooperative Weed Management Area working group made the weed a high priority target for eradication. "The Owyhee district supervisors noticed the alarming rate puncture vine was spreading through the county" and sought information from the Idaho State Department of Agriculture, said Gina Millard, Administrative Assistant for the district.

"We had great response from the public -- farmers, ranchers and townspeople."

WEED AWARENESS *Cont. from Pg. 1*



Puncture Vine in bloom. Photo courtesy of Jean Pawek.

About 250-300 people have participated in their efforts so far.

The district has identified source areas of puncture vine, and then moved on to farm fields, driveways and other dirt roads where the seed hide, Millard said. Each year, the participants spray irrigation ditch roads, dirt lanes, crop edges -- anywhere a seed may have fallen.

"We have seen a significant decline on sprayed areas," she said.

However, puncture vine seeds can last 15 or more years in the ground. "Therefore, we cannot let our guard down," Millard said.

One seed can grow a plant to a 12-foot diameter, producing thousands of seeds. A vehicle tire can pick up hundreds of seeds and spread them wherever the vehicle goes. In 2012, the district received weevils from Nez Perce, a biocontrol agent that eats the goat head seeds and plants. They will see how the weevils do over time.

"Using weevils seems like a more viable solution rather than spraying every year,"

Millard said. "The Northwest Owyhee Cooperative Weed Management Area (NOCWMA) will continue being vigilant in the fight; but it's a daunting task." The NOCWMA also offers herbicide for numerous other noxious weeds -- white top, perennial pepper weed, poison hemlock and more.

One of the Owyhee district's goals in its five-year plan is to "decrease the spread of noxious weeds through public awareness and education while increasing native plants and forage to sustainable levels." In fiscal year 2013, the district sprayed and mapped approximately 2,000 acres for noxious and invasive weeds.

And what of phragmites? In the Bear Lake area, the Bear Lake Soil and Water Conservation District has been working with the five-county Highlands Cooper-

tive Weed Management Area to combat the invasive form of phragmites, *Phragmites australis*. The invasive phragmites are taking over native reed patches on portions of Bear Lake, and it's feared that the weed will spread downstream on the Bear River and into the Great Salt Lake.

"We're trying to nip it in the bud," says Lisa Transtrum of the Bear Lake district.

Phragmites australis is a rhizomatous plant that's hard to control, and chemical control requires spraying on water bodies, which can raise Clean Water Act concerns. The best way to control phragmites is to spray it, harvest it and burn it, state weed experts say.

The Bear Lake district's role in the control effort is to get more property owners engaged to control phragmites around the lake, Transtrum said. "We're out talking to property owners, and working with a group called Bear Lake Watch, a citizens



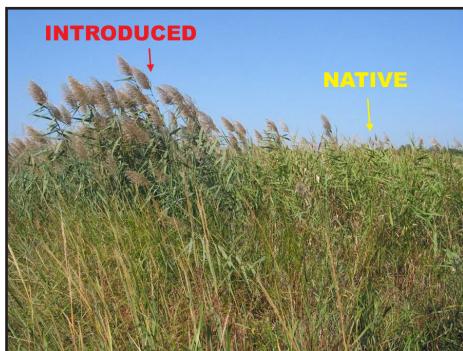
Tim Millard of the Owyhee Conservation District prepares to spray for puncture vines.

group, to spread the word," she said. "It's hard because some of the homes around Bear Lake are second or third homes owned by absentee landowners, so sometimes, it can be hard to reach people. It's going to be a multi-year project."

There is enough concern about phragmites that the weed management area has been raising private funds for herbicide spraying. "We've sprayed the last

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It can be difficult to distinguish native from introduced Phragmites due to the ability of the species to adapt to a variety of conditions. Here, leaf color differentiates the two plants. Courtesy of www.nps.gov.

two years with private donations," she said. "We've sprayed with a helicopter and we've had some success."

Matt Voile, manager of the Idaho State Department of Agriculture's (ISDA) noxious weed program, said the invasive form of phragmites also is spreading into reed patches along the Snake River in southwest Idaho. "We're watching how control efforts go on Bear Lake to see what we can learn from them, and then hopefully we can work on it up and down the Snake River," Voile said.

State funding for noxious weed control has become more important than ever as federal funds are dwindling, Voile said, noting that Forest Service funds are shrinking and the Bureau of Land Management no longer provides any funding for weed control.

Last year, ISDA distributed a total of \$1.24 million from cost-share grants to

CWMAs for on-the-ground integrated weed management. Program applicants provided over \$4.3 million in matching contributions, which allowed for treatment of over 191,600 acres of noxious weeds, and for nearly 750,400 acres to be surveyed and mapped.

Education and prevention are essential to the success of Idaho's program, ISDA officials say. Over 1.39 million contacts were made statewide for noxious weed education and awareness in 2013. Many of Idaho's soil and water conservation districts work on public outreach efforts to assist in this education effort and the Idaho Weed Awareness Campaign provides funding for radio and TV outreach.

Boise legislator Erpelding hopes his annual Weed Awareness Week gives already significant efforts all over the state a leg up. Noxious weeds, after all, don't discriminate between rural and urban areas. □

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE ALLOCATION PROCESS UPDATE

The deadline for submitting conservation district requests for assistance to the Commission was March 31st. Division evaluation committees are now hard at work prioritizing and recommending Technical Assistance allocation levels to the Commission. Division recommendations are due to ISWCC by May 5th. Awards will be announced in early June, and work on assigned projects will commence after July 1st.

Forty of Idaho's fifty districts submitted requests for FY 2015. The Commission's field staff works with districts all over the state, providing technical, comprehensive, and engineering assistance to support locally-driven voluntary conservation projects and activities. Due to funding and staffing constraints in recent years, districts must request field staff time for known projects in March prior to each new fiscal year. The Commission

also reserves a modest amount of discretionary time to address some unforeseen and compelling district needs for assistance.

This year, district Technical Assistance requests for known projects totaled 10,855 hours. Because ISWCC has identified a total of 5,351 field staff hours available to assist districts on known projects in FY 2015 - a rather large gap between hours requested and hours available - each of the six district divisions has been tasked with prioritizing requests submitted within their division and recommending Technical Assistance awards to the Commission.

The Commission has encouraged each division to choose a process that works best to come up with recommendations for Technical Assistance awards. Next year, the Commission will review all the

processes, solicit input, and identify a single process or combination of processes that works best for statewide use by all divisions in future years.

Among the processes being tried by divisions this year are: ISWCC staff prioritization, utilizing criteria developed by the FY 2013 Technical Assistance Work Group (TAWG), and dividing available staff hours equally among all submitted requests for projects within a division.

Once the prioritization and recommendation process is complete, the Commission will evaluate and award Technical Assistance based on division recommendations, the availability and technical expertise of staff, and geographic and logistical considerations. □

LONGTIME ISWCC STAFF REFLECT ON A QUARTER-CENTURY OF CONSERVATION

Two ISWCC Conservationists look back at careers that have spanned over 25 years, and recall the changes along the way.

Mark Hogen joined the Conservation Commission in 1988 at the St. Anthony field office. The following year, Chuck Pentzer also joined the Commission in Craigmont. At that time, the Commission was called the Idaho Soil Conservation Commission, and it was housed within the Idaho Department of Lands (IDL). The Commission was comprised mostly of soil scientists; however Mark and Chuck were two of the first Water Quality Resource Conservationists hired.

A large part of their duties was to implement State Agricultural Water Quality Programs (SAWQP) throughout their respective conservation districts. SAWQP, co-administered by the Commission and the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality (IDEQ), was designed to protect and enhance the quality and value of Idaho's water resources by financially assisting the conservation districts in the control and abatement of water pollution from agricultural lands, including cropland, rangeland, and grazable woodland.

At that time, Mark and Chuck spent the majority of their days in the field, and covered smaller geographical areas. These days, their territories span multiple counties, and although they are still getting their boots dirty, they often find themselves on a video conference, at-

tending division meetings, and logging miles in their pickups, in order to serve their various districts.

As Mark and Chuck look back at careers as conservationists that have spanned over 25 years, certain events stand out.

Mark recalls when the Commission was designated as the lead agency for TMDLs in 1997. A Total Maximum Daily Load, or TMDL, is a calculation of the maximum amount of a pollutant that a water body can receive and still safely meet water quality standards. "That was a huge game-changer. Soon after, the organization moved to the Department of Agriculture and it was a big change for the staff and administration."

Another big change? Technology. According to Mark, "Computers were another major game-changer." Chuck added that the introduction of cell phones has made his job safer and more efficient." We never had two-way radios like some other agencies, so when cell phones came along that was a big deal."

Like many agencies, the Commission has lost funding during difficult economic times, and programs like SAWQP are no longer operating, however they note that the mission remains intact. "We are still saving the same soil," Mark says. Adds Chuck, "I believe after all this time we still hold that core belief, that we are here to serve and help landowners and districts."

"Working with producers, gaining their



Mark Hogen



Chuck Pentzer

trust and building those relationships is a very rewarding part of this job," Chuck says. He also points out that what he believes has contributed to the longevity of his and Mark's service to the Commission is the variety that comes with the job. "No two days are ever the same. That variety keeps things interesting and helps us continue to grow." □

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