



L-R, Dave Wadsworth, Debbie Oleson, Max helping out, and Cody Couchum in front-end loader. (photo by Wendy Pratt)

C. BINGHAM DISTRICT ASSISTS OLESON FAMILY WITH MAJOR RUSSIAN OLIVE REMOVAL PROJECT

By Steve Stuebner

Debbie Oleson has declared war on Russian olive trees on her 500-acre ranch on the Blackfoot River.

She's on a crusade to eliminate Russian olives on 230 acres of their private land. And she'd like to see the campaign continue on a much broader scale.

Oleson and her husband, George, have watched Russian olives invade the lower pasture on their ranch for years. The bush-like trees with long, sharp spikes got so dense that they were overcrowding the pasture ground for their 300 cow-calf pairs, losing valuable winter feed.

"There weren't any Russian olives in that pasture when I was growing up – nothing but native species back then," says Oleson, who has deep pioneer

roots in the community along with her husband George. "Now Russian olives have encircled that lower pasture area and the area around the pond. It's a massive mess!"

Oleson attended a workshop led by University of Idaho Extension Educator Ron Patterson, where she learned about effective ways to stop the advance of Russian olive trees and kill the trees and shoots effectively.

Russian olives are an invasive species native to Eurasia. The trees were originally introduced to the United States for use in landscaping, windbreaks, stabilizing streambanks and creating wildlife habitat. Years later, it became evident that Russian olives are a highly invasive species. They can overtake native vegetation on ranches and farms, rangelands and

riparian areas, just as they have on the Oleson ranch.

"Once established, Russian olives are difficult to control and nearly impossible to eradicate," writes Jack Connolly, a former Idaho Fish and Game biologist in Bingham County who visited the Oleson's Russian olive eradication project last summer.

"Efforts to control unwanted Russian olive have included cutting, burning, spraying, girdling, and bulldozing. Most efforts have had limited success."

After attending the workshop, Oleson went shopping for money. She walked into the Central Bingham Soil Conservation District office and talked to George Hitz, a water quality specialist with the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission. Hitz

recommended applying for a state agricultural grant from the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality.

Hitz helped Oleson put the application together. They applied for a DEQ grant through the Central Bingham SCD. The District received \$20,342 from the DEQ grant, and the Olesons provided \$25,542 in matching funds to cover equipment costs, herbicide and labor for a total project cost of about \$45,885. The Olesons purchased a CASE skid-steer to use in the Russian olive-removal project.

The District purchased a special shearing attachment used for cutting the trees near ground level, and a tree-puller attachment to support the project. Both pieces of equipment will be available to other landowners upon request (see contacts at end of story), officials said.

Without George Hitz's help, this project wouldn't have happened," Oleson says.

"I had lots of people saying it couldn't be done - it's too big and hard for you to do, and no one else cares," Oleson says. "But I had been thinking about this problem for years, seeing these trees taking over my beloved land along our streams and rivers. I was getting increasingly alarmed by what I was seeing. Someone needed to start a campaign."

The Olesons' son, Shawn, operated the CASE skid steer and shearer. The shearing attachment cuts the trees cleanly near the base of the tree, and side levers bear-hug the tree so the equipment operator can carry it to a brush pile.

The Oleson family cut the large-diameter trees and limbs into firewood and burned the rest.

Debbie Oleson followed up the tree-removal by brushing the stumps and ground shoots with an herbicide to ensure there were no re-sprouts from the stumps or small shoots coming out of the ground. She used Roundup,



Shawn Oleson cuts off a Russian olive tree with a special shearing attachment on the front of a CASE skid steer. The shearing attachment can cut off the tree trunks close to ground level.

and the system has been working well, Oleson says.

"We're getting 85-90 percent kill rates," she says. "It's just marvelous!"

"This is a great story about a proactive landowner combining sound invasive species management with proper grazing management," says Wendy Pratt, a fellow Blackfoot rancher, neighbor, a supervisor on the Central Bingham District and a Commissioner on the Conservation Commission.

"The Oleson family is the best type of landowner for this type of funding. They are descendants from long-time pioneer ranching families. They have a strong commitment to the land that is evident in the care they took toward

this effort."

Oleson's methods mirrored what Patterson recommended in his

LOW INTEREST LOANS FOR IDAHO SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION

1% - 1.5%
Terms 7-15 Years
Up to \$600,000

- Sprinkler Irrigation
- No-Till Drills
- Fences
- Livestock Feeding Operations
- Solar Stock Water Pump Systems



swc.idaho.gov

(208) 332-1790

workshop. He has authored a number of professional articles and technical papers about the best treatment methods for Russian olives, including numerous publications for Utah State University. He worked as a county agent in Utah for 13 years.

"I've done quite a bit of research on controlling Russian olives, and the cut-stump treatment is the most effective," says Patterson, who now works as an UI Extension Educator in Idaho Falls.

In addition, Oleson's attention to detail in applying an herbicide to the stump surface and exposed cambium layer prevents re-sprouting. That takes a lot of extra time, but it's smart to do so, Patterson says.

Pratt agrees. "Debbie painted every stump with herbicide immediately afterwards to make sure the trees wouldn't re-sprout. It is this attention to detail that Debbie brought to the project, and it's necessary to make Russian olive control successful."

"Debbie is amazing – she really got after it," Patterson adds. "It's really great to see her doing something about this issue – it's a really major problem in Eastern Idaho."

The whole family's effort was impressive, Pratt says.

"The olives were so thick that they had to burn limbs on site to even find the space necessary to operate the equipment and pile trees and limbs," she says. "It was a big effort as Debbie also wanted to harvest olive logs of the right size for winter-time woodstove burning."

Through treating the lower pasture so far, Oleson said they have cut about six cords for their personal use, and they've given away at least 25 cords to neighbors, she said.

"That wood we harvested is heating my house," she says. "It burns hot and long and has very little ash. It's marvelous firewood."



Debbie Oleson is happy to see some of their pasture land opening up after removing Russian olive trees, stumps and limbs.

She's noticed that harvesting the Russian olives in the spring before sap moves into the trees in the summer time yields cleaner firewood. "If you let it go too long, you can get too much sap, and that sap is like tar," she says.

The Olesons followed up the Russian olive treatment with good grazing management. They're already seeing native plants and forbs rebounding after the removal of the Russian olives, she said.

"They're careful to allow grasses to grow back from grazing which means these pastures have the best chance to regenerate post-treatment," Pratt says.

Russian olives have a tendency to create monocultures and crowd out native species, Patterson said. The state of Utah and a number of other western states have added Russian olive trees to their state noxious weeds list to take an aggressive stance against their spread.

"A lot of damage is being done by Russian olives environmentally," Patterson says. "They are now the fourth most common riparian tree in the United States. Their seeds are spread easily by birds and animals,

leading to more invasions."

Steven Smith, a water quality specialist for the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, agrees that the spread of Russian olives is a significant problem. The Upper Snake Basin Advisory Group recommended that Olesons' grant application should be funded when it was reviewed by DEQ.

"There are places where they've taken over everything," Smith says. "In the Bear River area, they're really bad. I've seen places where they've pushed out all the willows and cottonwoods along the river."

Russian olive monocultures dramatically reduce plant, wildlife and insect diversity, Patterson says.

Oleson says she has been watching Russian olives invade rangelands where their cattle graze in the summer by portions of the upper Blackfoot River and near Blackfoot Reservoir. They are members of the Eastern Idaho Grazing Association and the Idaho Citizens Grazing Association.

"I'd like to get up on the rooftop and shout about getting rid of Russian olives," she says. "I love this land. It makes me so sad to see Russian olives going up Lincoln Creek and the

Blackfoot River. We're seeing it spread everywhere in the property around us; we're seeing it spread everywhere. The Shoshone-Bannock Reservation has a problem, the Idaho Department of Lands has a problem. It's just horrible."

She would like to see the state of Idaho add Russian olive trees to the state's list of noxious weeds. So would Patterson.

By designating an noxious weed species, it provides recognition that a plant has potential to cause injury to land, livestock or other related issues, as defined by a state, Patterson says. If a plant is listed on a state's noxious weed list, individuals and agencies responsible for public and private lands in that state may be required to control, reduce, eliminate, and prevent the growth of Russian olive trees on property they own and/or manage.

"The state needs to grab the bull by the horns and make it a noxious weed," Patterson says.

The Idaho State Department of Agriculture recently had discussions about adding Russian olive trees to the state's list of invasive species, but a steering committee evaluating the issue chose not to do so, said Lloyd Knight, Director of the ISDA Division of Plant Industries.

"It was proposed by some folks, we didn't have a consensus among the stakeholder groups to list it," Knight said. "It was an interesting discussion."

For the time being, however, private

landowners can follow Oleson's lead in working to control the spread of Russian olives. DEQ ag grant funds are available each year for that purpose and others, Smith said.

Each grant application can go up to \$250,000; the grant can cover up to 60 percent of a project's costs.

"The grant program is pretty competitive," Smith says, meaning there are typically a lot of applications for limited amount of money.

Oleson plans to continue the campaign on her property to eliminate Russian olive trees.

"This is a project for my 70s," she says, adding she just moved into her 7th decade. "It's probably going to be a 10-year project for us. We've got the whole area mapped and divided into Units 1 through 10. We're going to get rid of them."

Again, as part of the project, the Central Bingham District purchased the shearing attachment and tree-puller attachment. It will be available to local landowners who may want to do control work on Russian olives,



Sharp spikes on the branches of Russian olive trees.

officials said. To contact District officials about using the equipment, please contact Kerry Christiansen, 208-690-3525 or cbswcd@ida.net.

For more information about Russian olive control, contact Ron Patterson at 208-529-1390 or rpatterson@uidaho.edu.

Steve Stuebner writes for Conservation the Idaho Way on a regular basis.

CENTRAL BINGHAM DISTRICT TREE SALE

The Central Bingham Conservation District will host its annual tree and shrub sale on April 22-23.

The sale will be held at the Eastern Idaho Fairgrounds in Blackfoot.

Spruce trees, bareroot trees and shrubs, fruit trees and potted trees are available for sale. A large variety

of all types of trees and shrubs are available.

Go to the Central Bingham District's web site, cbtreesale.com, to order online in advance; hard-copy order forms available as well.

Information: 208-690-3525 or cbswcd@ida.net.

COMMISSION

H. Norman Wright, Chairman
Cathy Roemer, Vice Chairman
Erik Olson, Secretary
Wendy Pratt, Commissioner
Delwyne Trefz, Administrator



SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION COMMISSION

322 East Front Street, Suite 560 Boise Idaho 83702
P: 208-332-1790 • F: 208-332-1799
info@swc.idaho.gov • www.swc.idaho.gov

Conservation the Idaho Way: Sowing Seeds of Stewardship