

IMPACT



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Custer County Going to the Bugs

The Situation

Invasive species rank as one of the top environmental problems facing society today. In the book *Biological Invasions: Economic and Environmental Costs of Alien Plant, Animal, and Microbe Species* (CRC Pres, 2002), the author, Dr. David Pimentel, states that an estimated 50,000 exotics are causing tens of billions of dollars in harm each year in the United States. "In the U.S., invasion of non-native plants, animals and microbes are thought to be responsible for 42 percent of the decline of native species now listed as endangered or threatened."

More specifically to agriculture, the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) website states that introduced plant pests result in an annual \$41 billion loss to American agriculture, and cost taxpayers millions more dollars in control expenditures.

Idaho faces the scourge of invasive species as well. About 7,000 noxious weeds, plant diseases, plant parasitic nematodes or insects threaten all Idaho environments. Idaho agriculture, working with the USDA's APHIS, routinely watches for some 400 exotic plants, insects, or organisms considered potential threats to Idaho agriculture. Idaho loses an estimated \$300 million annually due to its noxious weed problem. The 36 weeds on the state's official noxious list "choke Idaho's streams and waterways, crowd out beneficial native plants, create fire hazards in our forests and rangelands, poison and injure livestock and humans, and foul recreation sites," according to *Idaho's Noxious Weeds*, a University of Idaho Extension publication.



Custer County is not immune to the invasive species problem. Several of the 36 species listed as noxious on Idaho's Noxious Weed list can be found within or on its borders. The County has long maintained a noxious weed program and in the mid 80's initiated a cost share program to entice landowners to combat our most serious threats, leafy spurge and spotted knapweed. Although very successful, it is limited in scope since only private land owners can qualify. With less than four percent of over 3.15 M acres of land in private hands other measures were (are) needed to combat the spread of noxious weeds in Custer County.

Our Response

Part of the solution has been cooperative agreements and later memorandums of understanding with the federal land management agencies. In place since the early 1970's they have helped, but federal dollars have on occasion been either slow in coming or nonexistent. A recent change in funding support

brought about by a change in public perception concerning noxious weeds, has helped to fund a more aggressive weed management program on federally managed lands. Initiation of Cooperative Weed Management Areas has furthered these efforts by providing an opportunity for all land managers to work cooperatively together towards one common goal, stopping the spread of invasive/noxious weeds.

It has taken more than thirty years to get to this point. Had Custer County waited or done little towards the control of invasive/noxious weeds, the situation would be dire. The answer has been the use of biological control. The first weed controlling insects were planted on Spotted Knapweed in 1974. The eggs of this small midge can now be found in almost every knapweed seed head in this part of the State.

Program Outcomes

Since that meager beginning thousands of weed controlling insects have been released on six different noxious weed species in Custer County. Over 128 release sites have been mapped and the GPS coordinates documented. There are 25 established stands that can serve as insectaries for collection and even more releases. Four more sites are on the verge of being classified as insectaries. Funding has been accomplished most recently through grants from Idaho Department of Agriculture cost share grants, Forest Service RAC dollars, and a grant from the BLM. These dollars have been in addition to the continued support of County tax dollars. Dissemination, collection and monitoring help has been provided by the Challis High School Envirothon team members.

One might say, “so what?” The use of insects has allowed us to be more productive, reach inaccessible spots, reduced the size of infestations to the point that chemical control is feasible, and lowered the total cost of control.

The Future

Noxious/invasive species invasion is an ongoing problem. Their spread is quickened by our more mobile society. This same society is also putting more pressure on land managers to use control methods deemed less hazardous than pesticides. These factors will make the battle against

noxious/invasive species all the more difficult. Biological control will need to become an integral part of every weed control effort. Custer County is well situated for the future and is committed to using all of the tools available to us.

For More Information

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