

A Weed Management Plan Is Needed Before Building Enclosures on Riparian Areas

The Situation

Faced with ever increasing pressure from the general public, environmentalists, and federal land managers to protect riparian areas, many Idaho ranchers felt the necessity of fencing off streams and waterways to exclude access to livestock. In Cassia County, this practice has allowed many of these riparian areas to be taken over by noxious weeds. Area ranchers approached Extension Educators to seek assistance in documenting the massive infestation of noxious weeds and the loss of natural grasses.

Conditions found in 1995

In 1995, when the oxbow (a peninsula around which Goose Creek meanders) was being fenced off to prevent cattle from tromping, compacting and causing deterioration of the riparian area, extension agents inventoried the plant population that was growing there. Ninety eight percent of the plant population was grasses. Two percent of the population was divided between Canada thistle, leafy spurge, and peppermint. The grass community was dense enough to suppress the invasion of aggressive noxious weeds.

Monitoring from 1995 to 1998

There was no grazing on this area during 1995, and during the summer of 1996 the grasses grew to an average height of 30 inches. During the winter of 1996-97, the dense grass matted down and prevented the more shallow rooted grasses from growing, thus killing approximately 50 percent of the perennial

grass population. The inventory taken in 1997 showed 50 percent grasses and 50 percent deep rooted rhizomatous perennials, mainly, Canada thistle and leafy spurge. There were large areas with no vegetation. During the 1998 growing season, most of the areas with little or no vegetation were taken over by Canada thistle and leafy spurge. This brought the inventory up to 78 % Canada thistle, 4 % leafy spurge, 2 % peppermint and 16 % grass.

The Future

Before any post holes are dug or wire stretched to fence off a riparian area a site specific weed management plan should be in place to help maintain the health and competitive nature of the community of grasses that exist in the designated area. This management plan needs to utilize the tools of an integrated weed management program. With an aggressive vegetative canopy and persistent low ground cover, the invasion of noxious weeds will be suppressed. Ranchers in the state are encouraged to use every avenue possible to make this happen.

For More Information

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