

EXOTIC WEEDS THREATEN GRAND COUNTY

By Bill Papich For The Grand County Weed Board.

Utah's top weed scientist says Moab and much of Grand County could become infested with foreign weeds never seen here, but which have swept over millions of acres in other parts of the country.

"That's prime country for yellow starthistle," says Dr. Steven A. Dewey, extension weed specialist at Utah State University.

Native to south Europe, yellow starthistle arrived in the state of Washington in the early 1900s as a contaminant in alfalfa seed. Since then it has spread across rangeland in the West at astonishing rates as infestations of the weed crowd out other plants.

In 1958 yellow starthistle infested 1.25 million acres in California. Today, the infestations grow on an estimated 15 million to 20 million acres in California.

Dewey says the Eurasian noxious weed leafy spurge—one of the most feared noxious weed in the West—also could show up in Grand County at any time. Leafy spurge arrived in the United States in 1827 as a seed contaminant.

Leafy spurge grows out of control in much of North America because it is not exposed to European and Asian insects and plant disease that keep the weed in check in its home countries.

In 1909, leafy spurge was spotted growing along a street in Fargo, N.D., but nobody thought much about it. By the mid-1950s, leafy spurge had spread to more than 100,000 acres in North Dakota and today the weed grows on almost 1 million acres.

Colorado has large infestations of leafy spurge and the seeds could arrive in southeast Utah in the Colorado and Green rivers, on seed stuck to vehicles coming out of Colorado or in hay from Colorado. Leafy spurge seed also could arrive from other states. Though the heavy infestations of leafy spurge are in Wyoming, the Dakotas and Montana, all the western states except Texas and Oklahoma have been invaded by the weed.

"Leafy spurge, even though they don't have it in Grand County yet, they should be worried about it," Dewey said. "I think that just about any weed could be a problem for those areas where there is some water."

Hundreds of such areas in Grand County already are overrun by the two most invasive weeds to arrive here so far: Russian knapweed from Europe and Asia, and salt cedar, or tamarisk, from China.

So many thousand of acres in Grand County already are covered with Russian knapweed and salt cedar—choking out native vegetation and damaging wildlife habitat—that eradication of the weed is unthinkable.

Spread of the weeds can be controlled, however, with herbicide applications and by exposing the weeds to exotic bugs from the same countries the weeds come from that eats the plants.

Dewey said the key to protecting Grand County from infestations of weeds such as yellow starthistle and leafy spurge is public awareness of the damage they can do and knowing how to identify the plants.

"It's a matter of prevention and education; getting people involved and finding these things when they first show up and getting rid of them," Dewey said.

Grand County Extension Service agent Mike Johnson says Moab being a tourist town

makes it vulnerable to foreign weeds. A tourist can camp in a field of leafy spurge in Colorado one day and spread out his seed contaminated camping gear in Grand County the next day.

Thorny alien weeds can stick to tires on mountain bikes and off-road vehicles. Mud with weed seeds can stick to the undercarriage of cars for hundred of miles.

“Because of the number of tourists we have going almost everywhere in the area, the potential for spreading the weeds we have and the potential for introduction of new weeds is fairly high,” Johnson said.

Oil and natural gas field equipment not cleaned before transport from one drilling site or pipeline project to the next can spread weeds. The only know spotted knapweed in San Juan was discovered along a natural gas pipeline right of way.

“It probably came in with the equipment,” says San Juan County weed control supervisor Max Black. “It was killed before it got out of control.” Spotted knapweed arrived in the United States from Eurasia as a seed contaminant and has ruined rangeland throughout the West. The weed also has been found at natural gas well site in Grand County, but sprayed with herbicides to keep it from spreading.

Tim Higgs, weed control supervisor for Grand County, said that if a Bureau of Land Management employee had not discovered the 10 acres of spotted knapweed when he did, it could have spread out of control.

“The whole well pad site was almost solid,” Higgs said. “The company people didn’t have the slightest idea what it was.”

After repeated herbicide applications, spotted knapweed now grows on only about two acres around the well pad,” Higgs said.

Quick identification two years ago of about a dozen noxious Dalmatian toadflax weeds in the book Cliffs mountains also may have prevented a weed infestation.

Dalmatian toadflax, with its pretty yellow flowers, was introduced from southeast Europe as an ornamental plant. When the weed becomes an infestation in the Western United States, it out-competes native plant species.

“We sprayed it and I haven’t seen any come back this year,” Higgs said.