

Russian Knapweed Warning Issued

By the Grand County Weed Board

Weed watchers in Grand County say Russian knapweed infestations have never been worse than during this year's heavy rains.

Even those who don't pay attention to weeds, but enjoyed last summer's pretty flowers along the highways, would agree if they knew that much of what they saw was Russian knapweed.

Those miles of pinkish-purple flowers blooming as summer was coming to an end were on a plant that arrived in the United States from Eurasia in the late 1890s as a contaminant in crop seed. Rain runoff from asphalt provides good growing conditions for weeds along highways.

Russian knapweed growth out-competes native plants, completely eliminating them where monocultures of the weed choke out everything else.

"Basically all the river bottoms on the Green and Colorado rivers are heavily infested with Russian knapweed," says Stan Baker, vice president of the La Sal Mountains chapter of the National Turkey Federation.

The group has helped fund a Russian knapweed control program on private land in Grand County using chemicals to kill the plants so vegetation needed for wild turkey habitat can replace the weed.

Trying to dig up Russian knapweed only stimulated growth because it spreads by black deep growing root which sometimes extend more than eight feet down. Tiny worms from Eurasia that bore into the plant can damage it, but the worms by themselves can't control the weed's spread.

The worms have been released on Russian knapweed test plots in Grand County, where they have thinned infestations but by no means put more than a visual dent in the plants.

"They've reduced it some and you can see the results, but it's extremely slow," says Grand County weed control supervisor Tim Higgs.

Away from insects, worms, plant disease and fungus that keep Russian knapweed in check in Russian, the plant grows mostly out of control in Grand and San Juan counties.

"We're finding new infestations all the time," Higgs said.

Baker said the Turkey Federation felt it had no choice but to use herbicide to control Russian knapweed on 120 to 200 acres where turkeys needed habitat other than a mat of noxious knapweed. The plant is allelopathic, "meaning its leaves disperse a chemical on the ground which prevents anything else from growing.

Russian knapweed has become a suspected carcinogen amid reports of people who have pulled the weed developing tumors on their fingers which required amputation.

"If you're going to cultivate crops for turkeys along the river bottom that are infested with the knapweed you first go in with the herbicides and try to kill as much as you can before you even dare cultivate the ground and plant anything," Baker said.

Nobody knows how Russian knapweed arrived in Grand and San Juan counties. Some say seeds probably arrived in hay or floated from Colorado in rivers that wind through Colorado and southeast Utah.

Higgs estimates that Russian knapweed now covers 5,000 to 10,000 acres in Grand

County.

“I’ve heard people say it probably came in the 1950s, he said. ‘I would probably say it goes back farther than that. I’ve heard people in Green River say it came in by sheep.’”

Even The Nature Conservancy— which is not known as a promoter of the use of herbicides— would use chemicals to kill Russian knapweed in a historic peach orchard the Conservancy owns near Moab. If herbicides could be used.

“We want to spray the Russian knapweed but we’re afraid of killing our trees,” says Sue Bellagamba of The Nature Conservancy’s project office in Moab.

“It’s our organization’s belief that one of the greatest threats to biodiversity in non-native plants.”

Grand County Weed Board member Gary Wilson says the county spends more for spraying Russian knapweed where it’s safe to spray herbicides, than on any other weed control program. Other invasive plants that have arrived here include Canada thistle, diffused knapweed from the Mediterranean region and Black henbane from Europe.

And of course there’s salt cedar from China, or tamarisk as the bushy tree is often called, which clogs the banks and sandbars of the Colorado and Green rivers. A Chinese beetle that eats salt cedar is being tested for possible release into the environment pending approval by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The agency has concerns that the endangered Southwest willow fly catcher— a bird which sometimes nest in salt cedar— could be harmed if the beetle is released before more is known of its eating habits.

Bellagamba says a united weed control effort is needed among all weed control interests in the Four Corners if a war against invasive plants is to successfully stem their spread.

“Somehow we all must get together not as political boundaries, but as ecosystem boundaries and come up with a plan to try and control these things,” Bellagamba said.