

## **Salt Cedar control is a few plants at a time.**

**By Bill Papich For The Grand County Weed Board.**

Tourists who take summer raft rides down the Colorado River for the excitement and scenery would be surprised if told what they see is unnatural.

Most believe the greenery along the Colorado and Green rivers appears close to what it looked like 200 years ago to an Indian in a dugout canoe.

But the Indian would not see salt cedar that today chokes the river's banks; salt cedar being the predominant shrub and tree along much of the river. In his time, the Indian would see a river lined with native grasses, willows and cottonwood trees.

Salt cedar, from Asia, didn't arrive in North America until the first part of the 1800s.

Also called tamarisk, salt cedar was introduced in the United States for use as wind breaks, to stabilize soil along waterways, and for planting as an ornamental plant.

Today salt cedar has invaded almost every drainage system in arid and semiarid areas of the Southwest, growing on more than 1 million acres. Away from insects and plant disease that attack the plant in Asia, salt cedar grows out of control while crowding out native plants.

"All the tourists see is this monoculture of tamarisk on the river bank," says Grand County weed board member Gary Wilson.

Salt cedar can grow 9-10 feet in a single season and is such a tough invasive plant that it resprouts after it is burned or chopped down. The plant's extensive root system soaks up so much water it can make springs go dry.

"In a lot of cases it grows so thick you not only can't walk through it, you can't even crawl through it on your hands and knees," says Gary Cornell of the state Department of Natural Resources office in Moab.

Cornell and Wilson want an Asian beetle that eats salt cedar, released on the Colorado and Green rivers. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has tested the bug for years in sealed laboratories to ensure it eats nothing but salt cedar.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, however has held up release of the bug out of concern for the endangered Southwest willow fly catcher, a songbird that often nests in salt cedar and native willows. The fish and Wildlife Service wants more testing of the beetle to see if its appetite could threaten survival of the bird.

The beetle is now being tested in outdoor, screened cages in six western states, including one cage in Utah near Delta.

Dr. Steven Dewey, extension weed specialist at Utah State University, says if the beetle is released, it is not expected to wipe out salt cedar infestations.

"We can try to suppress them somewhat, not eradicate them, but put them into some kind of reasonable balance with nature," Dewey said.

Another way to visualize salt cedar control is look at riparian areas not yet invaded by the plant or areas where salt cedar grows sparsely and there's a chance of stopping its spread, Dewey said.

"So often people say, we've got so many acres of salt cedar that there's no sense of even trying anymore," he said.

"If we get all in a fluster about the weedy stuff and don't protect the clean land, we're making a huge mistake. With a few dollars you can protect clean land."

Killing salt cedar where it grows in isolated patches is an ongoing effort of the National

Park service in southeast Utah, Park service workers have backpacked equipment and herbicides to remote park land to cut down the plants and apply herbicide to the stumps.

“We are not taking on big stands where they are concerned about the willow fly catcher,” says Steve Budelier, vegetation management coordinator for the Park Service in southeast Utah.

“We look at smaller, isolated areas where there’s a limited amount of water coming in. If you take it out of that canyon, at least you’ve eliminated it from an area so the habitat can improve.”

An example is the Salt Valley Wash in Arches National Park, where a salt cedar removal program has continued for 10 years.

“The most remarkable thing is that the native vegetation is pretty much coming back on its own,” says Gary Salamacha, resource management coordinator for Arches National Park.

Before the Salt Valley Wash became part of Arches National Park, it was thick with salt cedar and ranchers dug about eight feet down to reach water, Salamacha said. Today with the salt cedar mostly gone after 10 years of cutting and applying herbicides, water can be reached by digging only 10 inches down.

Native plants such as willows, big sage, rabbit brush and native grasses have replaced the salt cedar.

“You see more deer, you see more badgers there now,” Salamacha said.

“Before, in June, July and August, that area would just dry up. After removing the tamarisk, there’s moisture year-around.”

In addition to crowding out native plants and limiting wildlife habitat, salt cedar is flammable when the plant is dormant and the leaves drop and pile up, providing more fuel for fire.

Cornell said tourists who have camped in dormant salt cedar that caught fire have lost their camping gear; the fire spreading so fast they had to beat a hasty retreat with only the shirts on their backs.

“We’ve just been lucky that nobody has been killed,” Cornell said.

He said the Department of Natural Resources has considered a long-term program of burning salt cedar.

“In some locations we may use fire to burn tamarisk sites on short intervals every 3 to 5 years, over a fairly significant amount of time,” Cornell said.

“If we can keep knocking the plant back and its capability for photosynthesizing, we’ll be able to draw off the food supplies of its significant tap root.”