

Jury still out on caged exotic insect.

By Bill Papich For The Grand County Weed Board

A Chinese beetle that eats one of the nastiest weeds in the west, and rare bird that nests in the plant, have thrown a monkey wrench in the Endangered Species Act.

The Colorado River is choked with salt cedar, an Asian, tree-sized weed that crowds out native plants needed to sustain the rivers natural ecosystem.

But a Chinese beetle that in laboratory test eats nothing but salt cedar, may not be released into the environment because the bird has taken up residence in salt cedar.

The endangered Southwest willow fly catcher was named for nesting in native willow. The songbird, however, builds nest in salt cedar because the plants protective foliage is dense like willow.

Conservationist who want the insect released now, say that reducing salt cedar won't harm the bird because the less salt cedar there is the more space there is for native willows and cottonwood trees to grow.

"Our intention is to release the bug in limited key areas where we can knock out salt cedar and go in and plant willows," says Gary Cornell of Utah Department of Natural Resources office in Moab.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which oversees how the Endangered Species Act is implemented, wants further tests of the bug to make sure it won't eat salt cedar so fast that native willows and cottonwood trees don't have time to replace the salt cedar.

"There are just so many things that could happen if this bug was very effective and it worked quickly," says Fish and Wildlife Service recovery coordinator for the Southwest willow fly catcher, Stuart Leon.

"We're dealing with a very endangered species here that is reliant for nesting and productivity on the very substrates that they want to decrease the health of," Leon said.

Salt cedar arrived in the United States in the Early 1800s as a plant with an extensive root system widely used to prevent soil erosion along waterways. Today salt cedar grows on more than 1 million acres in almost every drainage system in the arid and semi-arid areas of the South west.

"Salt cedar is beyond manual eradication, beyond herbicides," says Jake Sigg, President of California Native Plant Society and who wants the beetle released. "Biological control is the only possibility of coping with it."

Sigg said Fish and Wildlife Service concern about the beetle harming the endangered bird's habitat is "too narrow a focus and they don't see the big picture."

"Quite a few desert animals are endangered because of displacement of the native plants by salt cedar," Sigg said. "There are springs and seeps out there in the desert that many creatures are totally dependent on and salt cedar finds these seep and dries them up because its root system is so aggressive."

He said the Endangered Species Act is "being used to endanger species."

The Southwest willow fly catcher lives in Mexico and Central America during winter, migrating to the Southwest in the summer to nest and reproduce. Since 1996 a Bureau of Reclamation commissioned survey of 350 miles of the lower Colorado River has found more than 100 nest, more than half in salt cedar.

The surveys were on contract to the biological science section of San Bernardino County Museum, San Bernardino, Calif. The museum's curator of biology, Robert Mckernan, says damming of rivers has stopped annual flooding willows need for thick, new growth, so to destroy salt cedar may leave the rare bird with nowhere to nest.

Without spring flooding there are no stands of water that willows need for new growth and no more annual deluges to cleanse sand and soil of salts, Mckernan said.

Willows won't grow in extremely salty areas, but salt cedar thrives.

"Without actually doing a drip irrigation you can't grow cottonwood trees and willows," Mckernan said of riparian environments forever altered by damming of waterways in the Southwest,

"My point is that we can't just go out and release a bug and start eliminating salt cedar habitat we may not get replacement immediately or maybe never get replacement of native habitat."

Cattle and wildlife do not eat salt cedar, but use dense stands of the plant for hiding or to get out of the sun. Possible loss of that protective canopy has Doc Lane of the Arizona Cattle Growers Association worried. He's also skittish about potential erosion along rivers without roots of salt cedar to hold sand and soil together.

"What happens when dams fill with silt because salt cedar is gone?" Lane asks.

This past August the U.S. Department of Agriculture erected screened, outdoor cages in six Southwest states to study the beetles eating habits, the first studies outside the laboratory. Utah has one cage near Delta.

USDA entomologist Jack Deloach, who has observed the beetles behavior in China, says the insect will never wipe out salt cedar.

"Eradication is a word we don't even use," Deloach said. "It's still there, but not enough to cause damage anymore. It's in balance with everything else."

A Fish and Wildlife Service decision on whether to release the beetle into the environment will be after they are studied in their cages for a year. That's in addition to the 10 years Deloach has studied the insects in China and in USDA laboratories, becoming confident the beetle and the bird can coexist.

However he doesn't envy the predicament of Fish and Wildlife Service biologists who must be absolutely sure.

"There's nothing worse that could happen if you were in that situation, with those responsibilities, than to have a threatened species go extinct under your reign---- an ecological disaster that you have presided over," Deloach said.