

## Thistle Weeds Creeping into Grand County

By Bill Papich For The Grand County Weed Board.

Noxious, foreign thistle weeds have taken root in Grand County, but spread of the plants has been limited, thanks to their early detection followed by weed control programs.

Canada thistle, which is actually a noxious weed from Eurasia that arrived in Canada in the late 1800s now grows in patches in Grand County, but has been controlled with herbicides.

Scotch thistle also has arrived here, but the weed has been stopped where it is known to grow. Scotch grows so dense in some areas of the southwest that stands of the weed cannot be penetrated by livestock.

Musk thistle has been reported growing in isolated patches of San Juan County and in Grand County along the Colorado River and in the Book Cliffs mountains. Native to Europe and Asia, musk thistle is known for growing so thick it crowds out desirable forages.

Other exotic thistle weeds that out-compete native vegetation already may be in Grand County, but haven't been noticed, says Rusty Wheaton of the Entrada Ranch 40 miles east of Moab.

"The thing that really scares me is yellow starthistle," Wheaton said. Yellow starthistle is a noxious, invasive plant from Europe that has spread over 15 to 20 million acres in California since the early 1900s. The weed has been reported growing in the Four Corners states.

Yellow starthistle has in fact, taken root in Grand County before, but thanks to county weed supervisor Tim Higgs' keen eye for the weed, it was stopped dead in its tracks.

"I was driving (on U.S. 191) and saw something a little bit different than the rest of the plants that were flowering, the yellow flowers," Higgs said.

"A day or two later I went back and pulled over and found just one yellow starthistle plant. Had it been mowed, it would have scattered seeds all over."

Higgs pulled the plant and bagged and burned it.

"You think of a road as weed pipeline," says Pat McGann of the state Department of Transportation office in Moab. "It seems like the problems show up first on roads and that's how weeds move so quickly."

Noxious weeds can become lodged in mud on the undercarriage of vehicles and transported hundreds of miles before dropping off. Weed-contaminated hay trucked through Grand and San Juan counties also spreads seeds along highways.

Canada thistle and some of the musk thistle is reported growing in and around the La Sal mountains, but spot spraying of herbicide has kept the weeds from spreading.

"We're keeping an eye on it," says Reben Leal, a rangeland management specialist for the Forest Service office in Moab. Leal said the more the public learns about identifying noxious weeds, the better chance of stopping them from becoming infestations.

"The more eyes I have out there the better," he said.

Higgs said Canada thistle was first reported growing in Grand County about eight years ago, northeast of Moab near the Colorado border. "We've sprayed it and it's not as solid as it was," he said.

Scotch thistle has been found growing in Grand County along Interstate 70 near the

Colorado border.

“It used to be on two acres, but it’s to the point now where I don’t need to spray it, I just have to dig up individual plants,” Higgs said.

In San Juan County, with more irrigated land than in Grand county, Canada thistle has become a major problem on farmland. Gary Crowley, who farms about 4,000 acres southwest of Monticello, says the way Canada thistle seeds spread makes the plant extremely difficult to control.

“The seed is very easily airborne because it’s got a little fuzzy thing that looks like a parachute, and anytime the wind comes up it will pick that up and deposit it anywhere,” Crowley said. “The noxious weeds are getting worse every year.”

Musk thistle has been reported growing at three locations on Forest Service land in San Juan County, but spread of the plant has been controlled with herbicide applications.

Jimmie Forrest, a rangeland management specialist at the agency’s Monticello office, said he won’t be surprised to see more musk thistle on the Forest Service land.

“We’re worried because it’s so prevalent just east of us in Colorado and it’s moving this way,” Forrest said.

Musk thistle seeds already are arriving in San Juan County in Cattle and taking root around livestock ponds, says San Juan County weed supervisor Max Black.

“A lot of our livestock people have their summer ranges in Colorado in the mountains,” Black said.

Dr. Steven Dewey, the extension weed specialist at Utah State University, says he looks forward to more stories of thistle weeds identified quickly before they spread, and he had a story of his own.

Dewey said that five years ago he stopped along a road near a beach on Bear Lake in northern Utah, where he discovered three thorny yellow starthistle weeds.

“I pulled them and called the weed supervisor,” Dewey said. “Every year they treat that area and look for any new ones that might have come up.

“That would have been absolutely devastating to those big, beautiful beaches. Sunbathers and yellow starthistle thorns just don’t go together at all.”