

## **Tim Higgs: Battling the Noxious Weeds of Grand County**

By Ian Torrence

More than seven million acres of the United States are infested with non-native or exotic plants. These plants disrupt nature's balance by reducing biodiversity, destroying native habitats, altering native genetic diversity, altering the hydrology of waterways, and further jeopardizing endangered plants and animals. When there are no established natural controls, such as predators to keep these non-native and harmful species in balance, there usually is a population explosion of the invasive non-native plants. This results in an ecological catastrophe. Many organizations and agencies across the U.S. have taken action in trying to mitigate and control these pest plants.

Tim Higgs is Grand County's answer to the explosive weed problem. "My main duty is to locate noxious weeds throughout the county. If those weeds are found on county lands and right-of-ways I'll control them. But if the weeds are found on private or federal lands it is my responsibility to notify those property owners so they can take action to control the weeds."

In 1990 Tim began his position as the Grand County Weed Supervisor. He moved to Moab in 1984 and worked for the Utah State Lands and Forestry Department. "I was a Forest Technician initially. I cruised and marked timber sales in the La Sal Mountains and the Book Cliffs. Then I switched jobs and became a state fire warden and worked on fire suppression activities in the county."

The combination of Tim's expertise with the county's front-country and backcountry, his Forest Biology degree from Utah State and his past experience with controlling weeds in Utah's Weber County in 1980 made him a perfect applicant for the county's Weed Supervisor job. "The guy who had the job before me was retiring. I applied, was offered the job and have been here ever since."

While Tim is out traipsing about Grand County's 2.4 million acres and driving the county's three to four thousand miles of road, he has to keep a keen eye out for the county and state's eighteen listed noxious weeds. "We are obligated by Utah state law to control these eighteen species of plants. Controlling the plants means to stop them from going to seed and stopping their spread. These particular weeds have made the state list because they have been deemed harmful to humans, agriculture, animals and the natural ecosystem."

"The most common noxious weeds we've found in Grand County are Russian Knapweed and Diffuse Knapweed. Some private landowners have a real problem with Canadian Thistle and Hoary Cress. All the weeds are difficult to control. But I try to give the landowners options for controlling the weeds. Hand pulling is the technique used most often, but sometimes they will use herbicides to treat the weeds. I make sure that they read the herbicide label and use the correct herbicide for the given weed."

Tim has an arsenal of his own to use in the battle against weeds. When he is working on county lands controlling weeds he has several methods available to him. "When I apply chemicals to the weeds I can use my spray truck for large infestations. If the weed patch is off the road a ways I can use an ATV to get the herbicide to the site or I can use a backpack sprayer. I use my hands and a shovel for some of the smaller patches of weeds. If the shovel gets the same results as the chemical, I'll use the shovel to save time, money and damage to the surrounding vegetation. The chemicals I typically use are

selective-use herbicides. That means they only affect either broad-leaf plants or grasses and forbs depending on the type of weed I am targeting so there is less damage to surrounding vegetation.”

Most of Tim’s chemical weed control takes place in the months between April and June. “July is the month we focus on bio-control. We release several species of bugs on Diffuse Knapweed, Russian Knapweed and Puncturevine (commonly called goat heads). The bugs are the plants’ natural predators, and they act to keep that weed population in check. In the fall I do most of my survey work. I’m always looking for new infestations. Some weeds, like Black Henbane, can germinate late in the season, so I’m constantly on the look out for them.”

It is not an easy job for Tim. He has a tough time finding the weeds he needs to treat. “The toughest weed to control, I believe, is Diffuse Knapweed. It breaks off and blows around like tumbleweed spreading its seed as it rolls. The best time to spray the plant is in its small rosette stage and at that point it is very difficult to find, so it is easy to walk right by it.”

Tim, however, has several dependable methods for tracking down weeds. He travels the county in search of corrals, sheep pens, stock ponds, hunter camps and any other places that great disturbance has occurred. “Weeds are transported in hay, on hooves, on feet, and on equipment that may have passed through a patch of weeds in another area. The weeds do well in disturbed areas where soil has been churned up and where water is available.”

Higgs works closely with surrounding counties and land agencies. “I work with counties in Colorado and the counties that surround Grand County in Utah. The federal agencies, like the BLM, Forest Service and Park Service, are tied closely to my work too. We exchange information on potential weed sites, best treatment methods and even go out and treat weed patches together.”

Concerned citizens also notify Tim of weeds. “Most of the time they are alerting me about weeds like kochia and Russian Thistle. These are weeds I can do nothing about because they are not on the state or county noxious weed list. I have no authority with dealing with these pest plants. So I either direct them to the city weed complaint people or to the fire department if the plants are a fire hazard.”

Tim is doing his best to get the word out about weeds. He feels education is the key that may turn the tide on the weed invasion. “I have developed weed posters, videos, CD’s, and newspaper articles. I’ve also helped in giving presentations to schools and other various groups about our weed control efforts. If we can get people to recognize the noxious weeds then we can do a better job of controlling them.”

Tim Higgs sees himself at this job for many more years to come. “I enjoy the job. It’s rewarding. I see a lot of nice places and meet a lot of people. I want to see more deer and elk around. That’s my goal. I feel I am working towards creating better habitat for the wildlife and a more enjoyable place for us as well.”

For more information or to find out how you can help contact Tim Higgs at (435) 259-1369. The Grand County Weed Board meets the first Wednesday of each month at 4:00 P.M. at the Utah State University Extension Conference Room in Moab. It is open to the public.