

Collaborative Group Initiates Valley-wide Weed Management Program

By Megan Birzell

This summer, the Clearwater Resource Council's Weed Mitigation Task Force began the process of developing a valley-wide coordinated weed management plan so that our community can more effectively reduce invasive weeds in the area.

The first step in this process was to find out where weeds are in the Valley. With funding from the National Forest Foundation and Missoula County Weed District, we initiated a community-based mapping program. First, we set up a booth with maps of town and the valley at the Loon and Fish Festival and asked community members to mark on those maps places where they knew weeds were present. Then, as the weather warmed up and dried out, we put community volunteers out on the ground to walk, ride bikes and ATVs, or drive roads and trails in the valley and mark down places where they found weeds. We started in the northern half of the valley because that's where we know the least about weeds.

With the help of our volunteers and a couple of staff, we mapped approximately 124 miles of roads and trails between June and August, and, as expected, we found plenty of weeds. It's no surprise that spotted knapweed was the most abundant invasive weed. Of the area we mapped, 62 miles was covered by knapweed. Now we all know that knapweed is a problem in the valley. But unfortunately, we also found several new invaders. Common tansy, leafy spurge, tall buttercup, and whitetop (hoary cress) are all present in trace amounts. Meadow hawkweed, St. Johnswort, and orange hawkweed together covered 4.5 miles of road. While this may not seem like much, it is very important that we act quickly when we find new invaders in order to prevent their spread. Remember, knapweed was once a new invader, and look what's it done to our valley.

We still have plenty of ground left to cover in order to document weeds in the entire valley, but this summer's project was a great start. In order to take the information we gathered this summer and use it most effectively, we developed a Coordinated Weed Management Strategy for the valley with input from community members and other stakeholders. The Strategy explains the impacts of invasive weeds, discusses the current weed management plans of major landowners and land managers in the valley, describes the current weed species of concern from widespread species to new invaders, and defines a strategy for integrated weed control and management.

One of the main strategies identified in the document is to focus on expanding weed-free areas in the valley. To do this, the Strategy recommends focusing weed mitigation treatments along the edges of weed infestations, as opposed to targeting in the middle of the infestations. This does not mean that we completely ignore weeds in known weed-infested areas. It is still important to mitigate weeds on your property and particularly to report and remove any new invaders that you see in the valley. However, for larger weed mitigation efforts, we'll have more long-term success by starting on the edges and then moving in to the more heavily weeded areas.

By combining the Strategy with the information we collected this summer, we will be able to seek grant funding for weed mitigation projects and use that funding to mitigate weeds in the highest priority areas in the valley. To learn more about our efforts, visit our website at www.crcmt.org.

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