

## **Got Weeds?**

By Roger Marshall

Most of us do. They might be found on your property, your neighbor's property, at your favorite fishing hole, or along the trail to your camp site. Weeds, plants growing out of place or where they are not wanted, are found in many areas we frequently visit. The weeds of greatest concern are the exotic invasive species. Most of us know the common invasive weeds such as knapweed, Canada thistle, and oxeye daisy. I am surprised at how many people don't know some of the more common weeds such as houndstongue or cheat grass, or, for that matter, the weeds that I myself do not recognize. When I describe houndstongue seeds as those little round bristles about the size of a pencil eraser that cling on your socks or shoe laces or dog, and cheat grass as the pointy grass seeds that poke into your ankle through your socks and that have to be handpicked to be removed, most people say "Oh yeah....I know those!"

A weed is a plant that is more harmful than beneficial. Weeds often outcompete and overtake native plant communities. This can result in less plant diversity and contribute to a loss of desired forage for livestock and wildlife. Weeds will compete with preferred crops and reduce the potential yields of those crops, often resulting in lower economic returns for people that depend on the land for a living. When weed infestations become severe or essentially a monoculture (single species) across a given area, soil erosion becomes possible and can result in a further loss of productivity for the land, reduced visual appeal, and a decrease in economic and recreational values. Really there are a lot of reasons weeds are not desirable.

Because the invasive exotic weeds are relatively new to this area, they have few natural controls such as insects or diseases that would check their rate of spread and growth. Most are very hardy and have adapted to harsh conditions where they can thrive very well. For many of these undesirable plants, human control and management is the best or only option.

This past summer the Clearwater Resource Council made a decision to step-up our involvement with weed management in the Seeley Lake area. It has been an item of concern for the CRC since its inception. However, wanting to do something and having the time, money, knowledge, and ability to do something may not always meet.

The good news is that over the past month a weed management steering committee has met twice to begin outlining a process to initiate a collaborative and collective plan of action for weed control in the Clearwater watershed. The steering committee has formally created a Weed Mitigation Task Force (WMTF) with representatives from MT DNRC, U.S. Forest Service, Plum Creek, Clearwater Resource Council, private home and land owners, as well as the Missoula County Weed District. This task force will be responsible for completing a weed management plan and begin mapping out problem areas. Knowing where problem weed outbreaks are and developing a plan to mitigate their spread will be a key component to creating weed-free areas. It will also be important to know where weed-free areas currently exist in order to keep new invaders from moving in and expanding across these areas. That is probably where you will have to involve your neighbor because if you treat your land for weeds, you wouldn't want them

spreading back in from your neighbor's land. How big or large these weed-free areas can become will depend on how willing all of us are to cooperate as citizens and neighbors to take care of the land we all have an interest in.

Weed management planning for the Clearwater watershed will try to involve all landowners, land managers, and interested citizens. To be successful, multiple tools and strategies will be needed to mitigate weeds. Education about which plants are undesirable and action to prevent their spread will be a major component of a good plan. The idea is to decide what we do want growing on our land and to manage for that result. The mapping of problem infestations will help target places where an effective treatment strategy can be developed to ensure success. Some methods to treat weeds include spraying herbicides, mowing, hand pulling, biological control, and grazing. All can be cost-effective and useful. Just as important is the need to reclaim treated sites to prevent the re-establishment of the unwanted weed or prevent new invaders where the bare dirt now exists. Remember, the idea is to grow what we want. It is also essential to know that there is a higher risk of weeds establishing along new or recently maintained roads, well-used trails, new construction sites, and utility rights-of-way. Where these management activities occur, landowners and managers need to follow up to assure new invasive exotic weeds do not move in.

If this task force develops as envisioned, it may be possible to have an expert work with you to identify a treatment plan, obtain funding, and complete successful weed mitigation for your property or even your favorite place. The intent of the proposed plan would be to create weed-free areas and expand them by trying to treat as much of the valley as possible. That concept will take cooperation and coordination from all landowners and land managers. There are many weed management areas in this state that are already very successful because of the attitude that it will work if everyone works together. A weed management plan for the Clearwater watershed can be as successful if the collaboration and coordination remains a key component of the overall strategy.

The Weed Mitigation Task Force in its recent meetings discussed the need to provide better information to the public. The current agenda will be to conduct a local workshop to help people understand weed issues, identify weeds on their lands, and prepare an individual management plan that may include opportunities for funding to mitigate weeds where they can. A webpage will be put up at the Clearwater Resource Council website ([crcmt.org](http://crcmt.org)) that will provide information about the programs available now to help each of us develop a plan of action to control weeds on our own properties or our favorite places. Additionally, news articles such as this one will be written to keep all of us informed about what is available for weed mitigation, what has been accomplished, and where we hope to go in the future.

Reducing the impacts of invasive plants, when they are located in places we do not want them, is part of an overall plan to be good stewards of the land. We depend on this land for so many of our recreational, economic, and aesthetic needs. It is in our own best interests to take care of it.

Now really, don't you just hate it when you get home from a day of fishing or hiking and have to pick all those burs and seeds out of your socks and dog?

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