

New Weed Invasions May Be Looming

By Bill Papich For The Grand County Weed Board.

Invasive weeds never seen before in Grand County are threatening to arrive as other foreign weeds not found here 10 years ago have taken root.

A patch of camel thorn— an African weed that can penetrate concrete foundations— has been found in the median strip of interstate 70.

Six years ago about 2 acres of Scotch thistle was discovered in the median strip about a half mile from the Colorado border. If left uncontrolled, Scotch thistle on rangeland can grow so dense cattle cannot penetrate stands of the 12-foot weed.

Two years ago about a dozen Dalmatian toadflax weed were found growing in the Book Cliffs mountains. An invasive weed from the southeastern Europe, the weed spreads so fast that a 63-acre infestation of Dalmatian toadflax near Border Junction, Wyo. in 1991 consumed more than 250 acres by 1998.

Dalmatian toadflax out-competes desirable native plant species and decreases plant species diversity.

“We sprayed and I haven’t seen any come back,” said Grand County weed control supervisor Tim Higgs.

Higgs has prevented spread of the patches of camel thorn, Scotch thistle and Dalmatian toadflax by applying herbicides to the plants or digging them up. However, he doubts the weed don’t grow somewhere else in the Grand County, threatening to spread out of control if nothing is done to prevent their growth.

“Anybody who can report anything is really a big help,” Higgs said.

Invasive weeds from Europe, Asia and Africa can spread so fast when they arrive in North America— away from plant disease, insects and fungus that keep them under control in their native lands— that the weed infestations reach such huge proportions that controlling the plants can become impossible.

Yellow starthistle, an invasive weed from southern Europe, arrived on the West Coast in the early 1900s as a seed contaminant and covers an estimated 15-20 million acres in California.

A year ago Higgs found one yellow starthistle plant growing along U.S. 191 and four years ago a single yellow starthistle plant was discovered in a Moab shopping center. The plants, bagged and burned to ensure their seeds would not spread.

“We need more people out there finding weeds and we need people who are willing to help us control them,” said Grand County Weed Board member Rusty Wheaton.

Russian knapweed has invaded her ranch east of Moab and Wheaton says her ignorance of the weed when it first arrived is partly to blame for the spread of the plant.

“If I knew then what I know now about the weed, could have prevented so much of it,” Wheaton said. “We would have still had the problem but definitely not so much. I want Moab and the county to be educated about weeds because I was not educated.”

Another invasive plant threatening to arrive in Grand County is leafy spurge, a weed from Eurasia that renders land useless when it spreads over ranches like the 1,360-acre Taylor Ranch in Klamath, Ore.

Before leafy spurge arrived at the ranch in the mid-1980s, the land was valued at \$125-

\$150 an acre. After the ranch was covered with leafy spurge within only a few years from the date of the weed's arrival, the land sold for \$22 an acre.

Leafy spurge is growing in a small patch east of Grand County in Montrose County, Colo. The weed is so tough repeated herbicide applications haven't killed it.

"We haven't let the plants produce any flowers since they were found in 1995," said Sheila Grother, weed control coordinator for San Miguel County and the western portion of Montrose County.

They're still growing, but at a slower pace than they would have. We're spending years trying to get rid of a patch that is measurable in feet rather than in acres."

A small patch of Dyer's woad, a invasive plant from Europe which invades range and cropland, has been reported growing on Forest Service land east of Moab. In northern Utah, Dyer's woad has been spreading out of control for most of this century.

The plant was intentionally brought to the United State for its seed pods that were used to dye wool when the pods turn black.

"Dyer's woad supposedly arrived in Brigham City about 1910 in a load of alfalfa," says Ira Bickford, roadside vegetation manager for the State Department of Transportation.

"They brought in alfalfa and unloaded it and were feeding it to cattle and it showed up in pastures. Now there a hundred of thousands of infested acres in Northern Utah, plus it's in Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico."

Another noxious weed making inroads in Grand County is black henbane, a plant native to Europe that has arrived in the Book cliffs area. Black henbane is poisonous to humans and livestock.

"The only time I've ever seen any of this plant eaten there was a dead cow 50 yards away," Higgs said, adding the weed made its appearance in Grand County about eight years ago.

Other invasive weeds that have arrived in Grand County, but which currently are not widespread, include diffused knapweed, Canada thistle, and spotted knapweed.

Without efforts to control spread of the weeds wherever they pop up, areas of Grand County could become like Tintic, Utah where invasive square rose knapweed was first reported growing in 1910, Bickford said.

"The people there at the time didn't know much about it said we'll just keep an eye on it and see what happens. There 's now 300,000 acres. A great deal of money has been spent trying to control it," he said.