

Some of them are pretty-colorful flowers that dot the landscape and offer an exotic beauty in southern Utah. But are they more than bright spots in a field?

Bill Christensen, Utah field director for the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, said noxious weeds are more- much more- than pretty blossoms. “They’re the number one problem in the western United States, on public and private lands,” Christensen said emphatically. “Exotic weeds are replacing the natural forage for wildlife and livestock.”

Many of the noxious weeds that threaten to overtake grasses in Utah are not palatable to wildlife and may cause harm to domestic livestock, Christensen believes. “Cheat grass, for instance, isn’t helpful to anything,” Christensen said. “It’s green in the spring, turns brown in the fall, and is no use to wildlife except as hiding cover. It’s not good as food for wildlife or livestock.”

But it’s not just cheat grass that can create environmental and health hazards to wildlife and livestock, Christensen said. “Tamarisk is pretty, but has very limited use for wildlife. It’s in all the waterways in the southwest and is very common. Along the rivers, it looks pretty, but it can be dangerous,” Christensen said.

Noxious weeds can take over the landscape, Christensen said, denying wildlife, livestock and humans of land necessary to their well-being. Efforts have been stepped up by most governmental agencies, he added, to increase public awareness of the problem caused by the weeds.

“We can work together to help control this ever-increasing problem,” Christensen said. “People can find photographs of noxious weeds on web sites and by reading books. And we need to be constantly aware of our environment. When seeds get stuck to our socks, we’re apt to sweep them off and let them blow away. But when they blow, they’re spreading and we want to control the spread.”

Christensen readily admits that complete control over the noxious weed problem is not realistic. “Eradicating them, especially cheat grass, and tamarisk, may be impossible,” he said. “So controlling them is the key.”

Controlled burns, re-seeding bare areas of land and the use of chemicals can help minimize the problem. “Chemicals aren’t always the best way to control the weeds but sometimes it’s the only way. If you have a large area to treat or have vicious weeds that be controlled by burns or re-seeding, chemicals are the only choice.”

“You have to be careful when using chemicals, however,” Christensen said. “Some aren’t completely effective and can damage other plants species that are helpful to the environment. You just can’t use chemicals will-nilly.”

Noxious weeds are spread easily, and usually without notice. “They stick to your socks, the tires of your vehicle, in the paws of pets,” Christensen explained. “It’s only by being aware of them that we can try to prevent the spread of them.”

Christensen said the public could help officials control noxious weeds by learning about the weeds and by encouraging others to become informed and careful. “We’d like people to check out our web site, www.elkfoundation.org, or call us at 1-800-call elk,” Christensen said.

Other sources of information are available to the public. Local extension agents, the Grand County Weed Board, other federal and state land mangers are willing to help.

“The more you know about noxious weeds, the more you can help us with this problem,” Christensen said. “This is an explosive problem. It’s become a plague in the west and is doing more damage to our wildlife, our range lands and the domestic livestock. There are lots of opportunities for people to help. If we work together, we can solve this problem.”