

On Common Ground

After decades of standing on opposite ends of issues, environmental organizations like The Nature Conservancy and beef producers are now joining forces to face a common adversary — invasive plant species.

by Ed Haag

While there are many issues that still divide U.S. beef producers and some environmental organizations, the weed patch may just be the catalyst that brings everyone together.

“The conservation organizations and the National Cattleman’s Beef Association (NCBA) share a common interest in the health of landscapes for both conservation and economic reasons,” says Jeff Eisenberg, director of federal lands and executive director of the Public Lands Council. “We all realize that weeds are a threat to the

economic and environmental value of the land we all love.”

John Randall, director of The Nature Conservancy’s (TNC) Global Invasive Species Team concurs, noting that weeds are the concern of all who wish to be good stewards of the land under their care. “The Nature Conservancy owns and manages over 1,000 nature preserves across the United States,” he says. “The fact that we own and manage that land is why we are so aware of the invasive species problem.”

Same tools, shared vision

Randall, who served as TNC’s unofficial in-house weed Extension agent working on behalf of the organization’s extensive land holdings before assuming his current position, believes that ranchers and land managers for conservation organizations have much in common.

“Early in my career I realized that when it comes to dealing with invasive plants we all use the same tools,” he says. “We may use them in different ways, and our ultimate goals may be different, but often they do overlap.”

Not long after reaching his conclusions, Randall had the opportunity to exercise his new mind-set. As weed liaison for TNC, he found himself interacting regularly with members of the ranching community. “I began working with a lot of folks from the cattle industry and state agencies trying to promote funding for cooperative weed management areas,” he says. “This also involved helping create weed management areas in those places that didn’t already have them.”

A common adversary

Randall and the ranchers he was working with all understood that weeds didn’t discriminate, they didn’t recognize or respect property lines and that if one landowner had a weed problem, his surrounding community, at the very least, had a potential problem.

“We saw that it was to the benefit of everyone that the weed issues be addressed as soon as possible,” he says, adding that the costs of containment and preventing a weed from becoming established in an area is miniscule when compared to trying to control or eradicate an established infestation.

Several documented cost analysis studies confirm Randall’s assessment, including one 2007 Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) survey showing that while the cost of controlling existing infestations of knapweed in Montana typically runs \$20 per acre per year, the cost of monitoring and preventing knapweed establishment in adjacent sites is around 4¢ per acre per year.



PHOTOS BY PATTY HAAG

► In 1995 the Tri-State Coordinated Weed Management Area (CWMA) was formed to help coordinate weed management efforts to control invasive species such as the Dalmatian toadflax.

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Probably the most important component of a successful long-term weed management program is actually identifying and mapping all the hot spots so that the infestations can be contained and spreading is prevented, says Art Talsma, TNC director of restoration and stewardship in Idaho. “Our approach isn’t just treating weeds along roads and in the worst patches. We want to keep weeds out of the areas that are in good ecological condition so they stay that way.”

His views on weed management aren’t unique within the organization he serves. TNC has successfully followed an invasive plant species doctrine based on prevention, containment and — where feasible — eradication throughout the world.

Pooling resources

Talsma, who is based in Boise, Idaho, began working in cooperation with private landowners, ranchers and government and tribal agencies in the Hells Canyon area in the 1990s. At the time, TNC was cooperatively managing, with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), a 15,000-acre ranch on the Idaho side of the canyon, as well as a 30,000-acre ranch on the Oregon side.

In 1995 the Tri-State Coordinated Weed Management Area (CWMA) was formed to help coordinate weed management efforts.

“A CWMA is a cooperative whose members believe that collectively they can do a lot better job of controlling weeds than they can as individuals,” Talsma says. “Instead of one guy, you may have 25 people show up with their ATVs and pickups ready to get the job done from top to bottom.”

He notes that kind of participation was absolutely necessary in the TriState CWMA because it was blessed with some particularly tough terrain — 250,000 acres of Idaho, Oregon and Washington mostly in the lower part of Hells Canyon, North America’s deepest river gorge.

Deeper than the Grand Canyon, that section of the Snake River gorge was known for its isolation and inaccessibility. In spite of this, the canyon was under threat from five major invasive plant species: yellow star thistle, leafy spurge, hairy whitetop, Dalmatian toadflax and purple loosestrife.

“It was a major challenge both locating the infestations and then treating them,” Talsma recalls.

High-tech weed survey

Because of the terrain, much of the initial weed mapping and inventory work required aerial reconnaissance. TNC contributed to the rental of a helicopter as well as providing



►Rancher and TNC partnerships don’t just involve weed treatments along roads.

the mapping expertise needed for aerial surveys.

The preliminary inventory process required an observer trained in identifying specific weed infestations from the air. Even with skilled personnel, much of the aerial work was season-sensitive and required precise timing. For example, Dalmatian toadflax could only be accurately identified from the air before the moth mullein bloomed. After, it became too difficult even for the seasoned observer to identify from a distance.

When weed patches were located, the observer sketched them on an electronic tablet linked directly to the helicopter’s GPS system. This resulted in real-time renderings of the canyon’s weed sites on an electronic map.

“Our involvement with the ranchers and landowners was not only to help map the weeds but actually go in and help treat the infestations,” Talsma says, adding that a variety of control agents were used in Hells Canyon, including herbicides, biological insect releases, hand pulling and the seeding of fast-growing plant stock capable of outcompeting the weeds being managed.

With most of their work in Hells Canyon successfully completed, TNC personnel in Idaho have expanded their involvement in weed management well beyond the Tri-State WMA. “One area where we managed a ranch was in Owyhee County,” Talsma says. “We participated and helped start a new CWMA.”

A new locale, a new challenge

Located in the Southwest corner of Idaho on the Oregon and Nevada borders, Owyhee County, with a population of slightly greater

than 10,000, is primarily cattle ranching country, with three-quarters of the land held by the federal government and made available to ranchers through grazing leases.

The ranch TNC owned from 1995 to 2005 in Owyhee County reflects that reality. “While the base property of the ranch is only 240 acres, it controls grazing on 70,000-plus acres through long-term leases with the Bureau of Land Management and the state of Idaho,” Talsma says.

After 10 years devoted to extensive vegetation mapping, habitat restoration and ecological monitoring, TNC began soliciting proposals from prospective buyers who were interested in purchasing a working ranch and its leases.

“It has since been transferred into private hands with conservation easements on both the core ranch and the leases,” Talsma says, adding that the grazing of beef cattle still continues on the ranch and its leases.

Jerry Hoagland, local beef producer and Owyhee County commissioner, notes that since he began working with TNC more than a decade ago he has found its staff to be nothing if not proactive on weed management, both as private land managers and as participating members of Owyhee County’s newly created Jordan Valley CWMA.

“Art Talsma is very aggressive in his approach to weeds,” Hoagland says. “He really understands what they can do if they get out of hand.”

He adds that Talsma and his crew are not afraid to roll up their sleeves and get dirty.

“What is really impressive about the Jordan Valley CWMA is that in spite of

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disagreements neighbors might have when it comes to weeds, there they are working shoulder-to-shoulder,” Hoagland says. “And there is The Nature Conservancy shoulder-to-shoulder with them. It is a real relationship-builder.”

Building trust, working together

Until recently, a major concern of Hoagland and his fellow ranchers was leafy spurge, a tenacious invasive that was threatening to take over much of Owyhee County’s remote canyon lands.

“We were particularly worried about the Jordan Creek Drainage, one of the tributaries of the Owyhee River,” Hoagland says.

Like the Hells Canyon weed infestations, many of the sites were in remote locations and, like the Hells Canyon weed management project, an aerial survey would be required.

As a county commissioner, Hoagland

knew there was some money available to fight weeds, but he also knew that little of it was available for discretionary spending.

“The county has always had a weed department, but we are limited by how much we can increase that budget every year by existing statutes,” he says. “By working with groups like TNC, we all have a much better chance of success.”

Again, Talsma was instrumental in acquiring logistical support needed to map weed infestations. This time it was leafy spurge infestations in the newly formed Jordan Valley CWMA. “TNC provided their own funds for mapping, as well as hiring a helicopter to fly over sites and GPS the

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— Art Talsma

spurge,” Hoagland says. “That way we were able to hit even the most isolated spots.”

For both Talsma and Hoagland there are both short-term and long-term benefits from working together. In the short term, it brings to them the satisfaction of successfully controlling the spread of invasive plants that could easily disrupt the native ecology and threaten the economic viability of valuable grazing land. In

the long term, the act of working together shoulder-to-shoulder creates mutual respect and helps build bonds of trust that make partnering in future projects inevitable.

