

Collaborating to Control Weeds in Asotin County



"I work for \$3.50 per hour, hike rough-brushy country, and encounter ticks and snakes on a routine basis... I love my job!" says Nelle Murray, Asotin County Weed Coordinator.

Five years ago, Nelle, a 28 year Alaska resident, moved to Asotin County and began looking for a job. Trained as a botanist, she was excited to learn the county was hiring a weed coordinator - arguably the most disliked position on County staff. But to Nelle, this looked like fun!

Together with her five member volunteer Weed Board, she quickly established a working relationship with the local Cattlemen's Association. This group elected four members to serve on a Weed Committee. Together the two groups envisioned and established a Cooperative Weed Management Area (CWMA) initially for 5,000 acres of private and

public lands. CWMA's are voluntary efforts that allow weed management to occur on geographic areas that make sense ecologically - irrespective of county or jurisdictional boundaries.

Asotin County lies at the head of Hells Canyon on the Snake River. The terrain comprised of steep canyons were formed from ancient lava flows and then topped with a plateau filled with ice age blown loess soils. Many of the canyons are inaccessible except on foot or horseback. One of these canyons, Tenmile Creek, runs into the heart of Asotin County. Local landowners believe this drainage is one of the major conduits for the weed yellow Starthistle's first invasion of the county. Since the area is seldom visited, no one knew what weeds were present. When the Weed Board and the Cattlemen's Weed Committee met they decided this area would be a good initial project site since weeds in the canyon would not only impact Tenmile landowners, but eventually the entire county.

Funding was identified as a limiting factor, so grants were written for project funds. These

augment the \$35,000 yearly budget from Asotin County's tax assessment funds for weed control. Grant funding has subsequently allowed a comprehensive weed inventory program to be instituted over a couple of large land areas.

"We had a growing weed problem here in Asotin County. We, private landowners, recognized the problems, but didn't know how to corral the infestation. Working together on a local level and forming and implementing a collaborative plan was the key to our success in addressing weed problems. It also helped to have a weed coordinator who is very interested in the environment and keeps the county well informed on new methods of controlling the problems," said Jerry Hendrickson, private land owner.

GIS Mapping: Next the local stakeholders decided to construct a baseline inventory to help them assess their weed problem. They contracted to have all of the public roads inventoried for the "Top 13 Weeds of Concern" with a GIS mapping system. These weeds will be controlled/eradicated using herbicide and bio-control efforts through a collaborative effort with the county and public and private landowners. While weeds are the primary target of this collaborative, locally-led, voluntary project,

they are also enhancing water quality, wildlife habitat, and soil stability throughout Asotin County.

Establishing Trust: "Earning the trust of the private landowners was the key to our success," says Nelle. Initially, she would call landowners and leave a message. It would take several days before they called her back. This is a rural county and they would call their neighbors first to see if she could be trusted. The Weed Board and Committee along with private landowners worked hard to ensure that the program was sound and made sense at the local level, thus this trust was built. Now private landowners call her back right away and even seek her out

with questions. Once a parcel of private land has been inventoried, a one-on-one meeting is held with the landowner to discuss the varieties and location of weeds found. Often a follow up meeting is scheduled for a field day to collaboratively spray-out the weeds and talk about how to keep the weeds out permanently.

Planning for the Future: Building on the success of their initial cooperative project, these weed partners are working actively on their own local "Weed Awareness" program. They are planning an ambitious project for next year to include thousands more acres of weed control on private and state lands.

Collaborative Partners:

Asotin County, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Asotin County Master Gardener's, Center for Invasive Plant Management, Wild Turkey Federation, Asotin County Sheriff's inmate work crews, Asotin County Cattlemen's Association, Washington Department Fish & Wildlife, Wallowa Resources, private land owners.

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