

## Weeds in the Whitefish Range and North Fork River Valley

### Introduction

Public land managers on the Flathead National Forest have long sought an effective and sustainable strategy for controlling/reducing the presence of noxious and invasive species. They have noted, in their *Noxious and Invasive Weed Control Environmental Assessment*, that “damage to forest resources from noxious weeds is increasing due to their expanding populations.”

The spread of non-native species on the Flathead National Forest has adversely affected every aspect of multiple-use management, including timber, range, recreation, fisheries and wildlife. Weed expansion erodes soil productivity, with implications for forest structure, fire, elk/deer range, riverbank integrity and winter forage. The continued expansion of invasive populations threatens healthy-forest initiatives not only on public acres, but also on adjacent lands. Flathead Forest specialists note that “without an adequate plan for weed control on lands managed by the FNF, efforts on other lands and the management plan for the individual counties are greatly hampered.”

The Whitefish Range Partnership recognizes that weed control is a chronic issue that cannot be addressed with sporadic funding; management of non-native species is ongoing and long-term by nature. While strategic planning for this ongoing effort is critical, funding is limited and emphasis should be placed on programmatic field work directly aimed at suppression, including prevention, control and eradication. Prioritization of suppression efforts must consider the following:

\**Location* (Wilderness, wildland-urban interface, high-use recreation sites, wildlife habitats, proximity to roads/trails, river corridors, timber units, wildfire areas, sensitive sites, etc.)

\**Species* (spotted knapweed, St. Johns-wort, oxeye daisy, Canada thistle, tansy ragwort, yellow toadflax, Dalmatian toadflax, houndstongue, hawkweed, leafy spurge, common tansy, sulfur cinquefoil, tall buttercup, field bindweed, creeping bellflower, hoary alyssum, yellowflag iris, etc.)

\**Cost/benefit* (as determined by location, species and treatment method)

\**Timing* (seasonal plant life-cycle considerations often require targeted timing to maximize benefit relative to cost, and must be assessed species-specific)

Priority should be given to preventing potential invaders from gaining a foothold on the Flathead National Forest; followed by eradication of new invaders that are not yet widely established; followed by containment and reduction of existing and widespread invaders.

### *Recommendations*

- The Whitefish Range Partnership advises adequately funded invasive species management planning and implementation that combines aggressive prevention and education with sufficient long-term weed suppression (including mechanical, biological, cultural and chemical treatment methods).
- The Whitefish Range Partnership recommends that distinct (but coordinated) non-native management plans/implementation protocols be established for front-country (roaded) and back-country (off-road) areas, as well as a separate river corridors plan (in cooperation with private river guides and other user groups) reflective of the exclusive qualities of wetland and riparian habitats and water-borne seed transmission.
- The Whitefish Range Partnership advises that these three distinct management plans (front-country, back-country and riparian) should include provisions for partnership, and the USFS should actively participate in existing collaboratives in order to identify shared opportunities, funding sources and projects. Partnership in planning/implementation is necessary, as FNF weed program staff recognize that “noxious weed populations on the FNF have become so widespread that not all of them can be treated with the resources currently available.”
- The Whitefish Range Partnership recommends that USFS actively engage neighboring landowners (private, public, tribal, county extension offices, etc.), as well as collaboratives such as the Resource Advisory Committee, in seeking cooperative grants and Congressional appropriations to fund long-term management programs.
- In addition, the Whitefish Range Partnership recommends a formal network be established to ensure agency and inter-agency coordination. This “clearing house” (in the form of a list-serve or file-share system) should serve to secure and to direct additional and shared funding toward: identifying, inventorying and monitoring new invasive species; preventing spread through education (signage, public outreach, media, etc) and best practices (washing/inspecting machinery, area/road closures, weed-seed-free feed, etc); and especially controlling invasive populations through appropriate treatment methods, including re-seeding with native plants.
- The Whitefish Range Partnership recommends that these partnership-funded mechanisms employ adaptive strategies grounded in an action/monitor/adjust model, and should include both trans-jurisdictional coordination as well as partnership with user groups such as Back Country Horsemen and North Fork Landowners Association. Cooperative tactics should include, but not be limited to shared databases/information; shared resources

(personnel, equipment, chemicals, funds); shared agreements (challenge cost-share, participating agreements, cooperative agreements, memorandums of understanding, etc.); federal/state/county/private coordination; and shared grant and legislative applications.

- The Whitefish Range Partnership recognizes that many private companies work on FNF lands throughout the year under contract, lease, bid-sale and special-use permits. WRP recommends that all such arrangements contain appropriate provisions commiserate to impact for prevention of weed spread and suppression of weed communities, and that these private partners be held responsible for expressed weed-control costs/efforts, and that right of use to FNF lands be revoked should private partners fail to maintain adequate weed-control programs as defined by FNF.
- The Whitefish Range Partnership recommends that FNF staff establish and follow best-practices protocols intended to minimize over-spray impacts to non-target species, including site inspections of spray units both before and after application. WRP further recommends that training be required for all private contractors involved in weed suppression, to minimize over-spray impacts to non-target species, and that training include methodology for pre- and post-application site inspections.

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### **Addendum**

Community collaboratives such as the Whitefish Range Partnership should be considered powerful allies in an aggressive USFS strategy to secure long-term funding through federal legislation, grants and other means. Additionally, establishment of land-use designations (Wilderness, National Recreation Areas, Special Study Areas, etc) often results in new funding for backcountry rangers and weed controls, and should be considered as part of long-term weed-management planning. The WRP also recognizes that private contractors are critical to weed management, and that those contractors cannot make effective long-term business decisions (hiring, equipment purchase, etc.) without assurance of long-term weed management funding.

**Tentatively approved by unanimous consensus of the Whitefish Range Partnership on 3/27/2013.**

**Committee Members:** Frank Vitale, Greg Schatz, Tom Edwards, Bill Dakin, Roger Sherman, Greg Gunderson and Michael Jamison