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Native versus noxious weeds

Soil and Water District's fourth weed workshop draws a crowd

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While Ralph Waldo Emerson's assertion that a weed is simply "a plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered" may have been borne out by mainstream culture's newfound respect for dandelions and cannabis, the virtues of state- and federally-listed noxious weeds are decidedly more elusive.

About 50 enthusiastic local residents enrolled in an all-day workshop last Friday (July 8) hosted by the Taos Soil and Water Conservation District to learn about the widespread presence of noxious weeds, identification, proper mitigation techniques and disposal methods. The day's lessons, imparted by Richard Lee, an integrated pest management specialist for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, New Mexico State University Extension Weed Specialist Leslie Beck and the Taos Land Trust's Ben Wright, were both complex and applicable to a large number of plants found in Taos County.



Studies have demonstrated the economic cost of noxious vegetation to be in the tens of billions of dollars in the U.S. alone and in the trillions globally, according to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which commands the federal war on noxious weeds.

According to BLM, "Federal and/or state law designates plants as 'noxious' if they are overly aggressive, difficult to manage, parasitic, poisonous, carriers or hosts of serious insects or diseases." Some noxious weeds, like Scotch thistle and Canada thistle for example, have doppelgangers — like New Mexico thistle — that are non-noxious native species, making identification tricky.

A list of state-recognized noxious weeds is available on the State Forestry Division website (tswcd.org/noxious-weeds) and the Taos Soil and Water Conservation District maintains an online guide to noxious weeds commonly found in north central New Mexico (tswcd.org/noxious-weeds).

Most noxious weeds are invasive or non-native plants that were accidentally brought to the U.S. — hoary cress in the ballasts of ships and in imported alfalfa — or intentionally planted in North America, like Siberian elms. Clyde Tingley, 1930s-era mayor of Albuquerque, is remembered for many accomplishments, but will forever be reviled for planting the first of New Mexico's Siberian elms in the Duke City and distributing them across the state.

Motorists driving through the rural outskirts of Taos, where pepperweed, several thistles, chicory and a host of other weeds thrive, are probably more familiar with noxious weeds than they realize. They are tenacious and they are everywhere; some are even sold as ornamental plants in garden stores.



Myrtle spurge, a creeping perennial on the State's noxious weed "watch list," is used in landscaping, particularly the xeriscaping commonly installed in New Mexico. One attendee claimed to have spotted it in the landscaping outside of Holy Cross Medical Center in Taos, a statement that produced ironic laughter since the ground cover's milky, latex-like sap is toxic and causes severe skin irritation in some people.

"There was a young girl north of Denver that came in contact with myrtle spurge and as small children are, they always are rubbing their face; she rubbed her face and her eyes, and she got the sap in her eyes. And she's now blind," Lee said, displaying a photo of the girl. "You can see that it has burned her skin."

More commonly, the impacts of noxious weeds are felt by the agricultural and gardening communities. Ferried by a commercial bus, the noxious weeds tour made an afternoon stop southeast of Taos at Larry Mondragon's residential property. From his driveway overlooking what was once pasture for sheep, one of the best livestock for mitigating noxious weeds, Mondragon pointed out the infestation of Russian olive trees in the valley below. The cattle he now grazes in the pasture for part of the year find their preferred vegetation crowded out by the invasive trees and other weeds.

"It started way further up as you can see," Mondragon said, pointing to an even denser infestation of Russian olive trees in a neighboring pasture. "It just keeps spreading; and they suck up a lot of water."

Mondragon said 80 years ago, there wasn't a noxious weed problem in the pasture.



"This has gotten bad within the last five, six years," he said. "The Russian olives started about then."

Aside from pulling the trees out carefully one by one, the experts on the tour didn't have a lot of ideas for mitigating the infestation on Mondragon's property.

"Putting a bulldozer in there would be a mess. Treat it like a fire, don't let it continue to encroach," Lee said, adding that it will take years of labor to rid the valley of Russian olives and Siberian elms, which were prevalent about a mile east of Mondragon's pasture.

The agricultural community relies heavily on grazing to control a lot of species of noxious weeds, but some invasive vegetation doesn't respond to "targeted grazing" — because cattle and horses won't eat them — and are better controlled using fire or herbicides. For those who choose not to use chemical treatments and don't have appropriate livestock readily available, many species of noxious weeds can't be killed by any means other than hand-pulling them.

Two neighbors who attended the workshop wanted to improve their plans for ridding their adjoining plots of land of noxious weeds.

"Today we learned about the complexity of the situation and targeting different plants and being knowledgeable about complex strategies," said Dianne Singerman, who sat eating the enchilada lunch provided to attendees outside the Soil and Water Conservation District's building during a break between morning lectures and the afternoon field trip.

"I've been here about five years now and have pasture that used to have animals," she said. "I've wasted a lot of money going to the store and they just put wildflowers and you spend a lot of money on seed and it doesn't work."



"I've tried digging, I've tried planting, I've tried everything," Singerman's neighbor Scot Renick added, noting that he learned some new techniques from the workshop. "Hopefully, we'll cover it so we have an opportunity to grow, and I think I'm ready to figure out some herbicide."

Renick also expressed amazement that it was legal for gardening stores to sell plants that are on the federal and state noxious weed lists.

"That's what surprises me, you have lists, federal, state, whatever, and nurseries are still allowed to sell these as landscape material? I find that amazing," he said.

Fellow weed workshopper Carina Short, who said she won't use herbicides, summarized her takeaway.

"The bottom line is, this is hard work," she said. "You have to put in your pulling and manual labor."

For more information about noxious weeds in Taos County and to learn about weed mitigation assistance programs that may be available, contact the Taos Soil and Water Conservation District at 575-751-0584 or visit **tswcd.org**.