

Cheatgrass
Bromus tectorum

Currently in Montana, noxious weeds infest about 7.6 million acres (Montana's Noxious Weed Management Plan, 2008). Many of these state listed noxious weeds were brought to America as ornamentals for gardens, medicinal purposes, by accident in discarded soil from a ship's ballast or unintentionally in bags of seed brought from other parts of the world. Whatever the cause of introduction, 32 non-native plant species have found their way onto Montana's state noxious weed list.

Cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*), is a Priority 3 regulated plant in the state of Montana. Priority 3 species are *not* state listed noxious weeds, they are considered regulated plants. These regulated plants have the potential to have significant negative impacts. The plant may not be intentionally spread or sold other than as a contaminant in agricultural products. The state recommends research, education and prevention to minimize the spread of the regulated plant. Species listed as Priority 3 regulated plants are: cheatgrass, hydrilla, and Russian olive.

Cheatgrass is native to the Mediterranean region of Europe and was first introduced to the United States accidentally sometime before 1860. There is evidence that suggests that cheatgrass was introduced as a contaminant in seeds as well as in the soil that ships used to fill their ballast for weight while sailing from Europe. Cheatgrass was able to spread rapidly around the country because straw contaminated with cheatgrass seeds was used by railroad companies as packing material. Early known occurrences of cheatgrass come from Washington, Utah, Colorado, Montana and British Columbia, where wheat farmers thought that they had been 'cheated' by being sold impure seed that reduced the yield of their wheat crop.

Cheatgrass tends to establish on heavily grazed rangelands, where winter wheat is grown, along roadsides and other disturbed areas. Cheatgrass is an erect-stemmed annual grass that grows to about 20-70 cm in height. Leaves and blades of the grass are covered with soft short hairs. Cheatgrass flowers from May to June and the seeds can germinate in the fall or the spring; however, fall germination is more common. When a cheatgrass seed germinates in the fall, it develops a root system that is able to expand over the winter, which gives the plant a competitive edge to use available water and nutrients in the spring before other plant species. Cheatgrass can be identified by its branched base and its silvery green appearance before going to seed; after flowering and producing seed, cheatgrass turns rusty-red to purple at maturity.

Cheatgrass produces seeds that are 3/8" long with a long bristle like appendage or an awn that is equal to or greater than the length of the seed. The long bristle like appendage can get stuck in clothing, socks and shoes and animal fur, providing a mode of transportation for the seed to be dispersed to uninfected areas creating new infestations. Seeds also have the potential to be spread by wind and water as well as by transportation from animals and humans. One cheatgrass plant has the potential to produce as many as 300 seeds per plant. Seeds can remain viable for up to 11 years in dry storage and buried seeds can maintain their viability for 2-5 years.

Cheatgrass can be controlled by various integrated weed management techniques such as cutting or mowing, herbicides, grazing by sheep, hand pulling, and cultivation. Often control measures are most successful by using a combination of control methods.

Please take a few moments to learn about cheatgrass and each of the other state listed noxious weeds. If noxious weeds are not currently a problem in your area, they may be in the near future. For more information about Montana's state listed noxious weeds, regulated plants, or weed species listed on your county weed list, please contact your local county weed district (can list weed district name here... ex: Lewis & Clark County Weed District) at (406) (Phone number). Or you can contact the Montana Department of Agriculture at (406) 444-3144.