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Rangeland Weed Management

by Roger L. Sheley, former Montana State University Extension Noxious Weeds Specialist

How to plan and implement a rangeland weed management program, focusing especially on control of noxious weeds.



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TODAY'S RANGELAND MANAGERS DEPEND UPON integrated weed management (IWM) because of the magnitude and complexity of noxious weeds combined with the cost of controlling them. Any IWM program involves the use of several control techniques in a well-planned, coordinated, and organized strategy to reduce the impact of weeds on rangelands.

Inventory and mapping are the first phases of any integrated weed management program. The second phase includes prioritizing weed problems and choosing and strategically implementing control techniques for a particular weed management unit. The third phase is adopting proper range management practices as a portion of the integrated program. The IWM program must fit into an overall range management plan.

Inventory and Mapping

Inventory comes first in all integrated weed management programs. Identifying weeds and conducting an inventory require considerable technical skill and can be time consuming but are necessary. The goal is to determine and record the weed species present, the area infested, the density of the infestation, rangeland under threat of invasion, soil and range types and other site factors pertinent to successful management of weed-infested rangeland. Inventories can be conducted by field surveys, aerial photography and using geographic information systems.

Information from an inventory should be incorporated into a map that shows the location, type and size of weed infestations. Accurate mapping is important in developing a land use plan and in evaluating the success of a weed management program. Your county weed coordinator or Extension agent can assist you in your inventory and mapping. *Inventory and Survey Methods*

for Nonindigenous Plant Species (EB0171), available from MSU Extension Publications, can also provide guidance for weed inventory and mapping.

Planning and Implementation

Planning and implementing an integrated weed management strategy is the second phase of rangeland weed management. Problems and solutions must be identified and prioritized and an economical plan of action should be developed to provide direction for implementing the IWM program. Integrated weed management includes preventing encroachment into rangeland that is not infested, detecting and eradicating new weed introductions, containing and controlling large-scale infestations using an integrated approach, and often, revegetation.

The key components of any successful weed management program are sustained effort, constant evaluation and the adoption of improved strategies. County weed coordinators, Extension agents and private consultants can assist in planning and implementing IWM strategies.

Preventing Weed Encroachment

Preventing the introduction of rangeland weeds is the most practical and cost-effective method for their management. Prevention programs include limiting weed seed dispersal, minimizing soil disturbance and properly managing desirable vegetation. New weed introductions can be minimized by:

- 1) using weed-seed-free hay, feed grain, straw and mulch,
- 2) refraining from driving vehicles and machinery through weed infestations and washing the undercarriage of vehicles and machinery after driving from a weed-infested area to an uninfested area,

- 3) allowing livestock to graze weed-infested areas only when weeds are not flowering or producing seeds, or moving livestock to a holding area for about 14 days after grazing a weed-infested area and before moving them to weed-free areas,
- 4) requesting that campers, hikers and sportsmen brush and clean themselves and equipment after participating in activities in weed-infested areas,
- 5) minimizing unnecessary soil disturbance by vehicles, machinery, water flow and livestock,
- 6) managing desirable vegetation to be vigorous and competitive with weeds.

Detecting and Eradicating New Introductions

Early detection and systematic eradication of weed introductions are central to integrated weed management. Weeds encroach by establishing small satellite infestations, which are usually the spreading front of the large infestation. Eradication involves using appropriate techniques to totally remove the weed from the area. It is usually achievable on a small scale. An eradication program includes delimiting the boundaries of the infestation (on the ground and on maps), determining the proper control procedures and the number and timing of follow-up applications. This generally requires aggressive annual applications of herbicides. Revegetation of infested areas may be required to eradicate weeds in areas without an understory of desirable species which can re-occupy the site after weeds are controlled. Eradication of small patches requires continual monitoring and evaluation to ensure successful and permanent removal of the weed.

Containing Large-scale Infestations

Containment programs restrict the encroachment of large-scale weed infestations. Studies have shown that containing weed infestations which are too large to eradicate is cost effective because it preserves neighboring uninfested rangeland and enhances the success of future large-scale control programs. Containing a large-scale infestation requires using preventative techniques and spraying herbicides on the border of weed infestations to stop the advancing front of weed encroachment.

Large-scale Weed Control

Most successful large-scale weed control programs are completed in a series of steps. Weed control areas should be divided into smaller units to make them more manageable. Weed control should be carried out unit by unit at a rate compatible with economic objectives.

Initially, large-scale weed control should focus on range sites with an understory of residual grasses and the highest potential productivity. Suppressed grasses have the greatest chance of re-establishing dominance on these sites. These areas must be spot treated each year to ensure control and minimize re-invasion. In most cases, some percentage of the management unit will require control measures that are repeatedly applied until the weed seed bank and root reserves are exhausted.

Next, control efforts should focus on the sites adjacent to those initially treated to minimize re-introduction of the weeds. Usually, large-scale control is most effectively applied from the outside of the weed management unit inward toward its center.

Selection and application of weed control techniques in large-scale control programs depends on the specific circumstances for each portion of the management unit. Control techniques used in one area of the management unit may be inappropriate for another area. Selection of a proper control program will depend on:

- 1) weed species,
- 2) effectiveness of the control technique,
- 3) availability of control agents or grazing animals,
- 4) use of the land,
- 5) length of time required for control,
- 6) environmental considerations and
- 7) relative cost of the control techniques.

Researchers are in the process of determining if combining treatments will provide a synergistic response in controlling weeds. Some preliminary evidence suggests most control techniques are compatible. Experimenting with combinations of control techniques may provide better and longer term control than any singly applied treatment. For example, in areas with adequate precipitation, combining Tordon 22K with fertilizer can increase the longevity of spotted knapweed control and triple forage production over either treatment applied alone.

Revegetation

Revegetation with desirable plants may be the best long-term alternative for controlling weeds on sites without an understory of desirable species. Establishing competitive grasses can minimize the re-invasion of rangeland weeds and provide excellent forage production. On appropriate sites, a fall herbicide application after weeds have emerged, followed by plowing or disking, and drill seeding is most effective for establishing desirable species.

Proper Range Management

Adopting proper range management practices in conjunction with the integrated weed management program is the third step to success. Follow-up management determines the longevity of weed control. Proper livestock grazing is essential to maintain competitive desirable plants, which will help prevent weed re-invasion after control measures are completed. A grazing plan should be developed for any management unit involved in a weed management program. The plan should include altering the season of use and stocking rates to achieve moderate grass utilization. Grazing systems should rotate livestock to allow plants to recover before being regrazed and to promote litter accumulation. Litter fall is necessary for proper nutrient cycling which is central to maintaining a healthy plant community.

Range monitoring and annual evaluations should be conducted to determine the adequacy of existing management plans.

Monitoring and Evaluations

We monitor in order to determine what is happening on the range over time. Monitoring and evaluation are the keys to determining when weed and/or grazing management plans should be changed. Monitoring involves making observations, gathering data and keeping records on the range condition and trend.

Monitoring must be designed to detect changes in weeds and desirable plants, biological control agents and soil surface conditions including litter accumulation, exposed soil, erosion and soil compaction. Management practices (e.g. grazing patterns) and factors affecting condition and trend must be monitored as well. Data from this year's monitoring must be compared to that from earlier years, and weed and grazing management programs must be adjusted according to the predetermined management objectives.

Summary

Noxious rangeland weeds are highly competitive and persistent. Their control requires integrating a number of methods. Integrated weed management programs begin with an inventory and mapping of the ranch or management unit to identify weed problems and land use. Once identified, problems can be prioritized and an integrated weed management strategy that includes prevention, detection and eradication of new infestations, containment and control of large-scale infestations, and revegetation can be planned and coordinated with a grazing management plan. Weed encroachment can be prevented by limiting weed seed spread, minimizing soil disturbance and maintaining vigorous and competitive forage plants.

Small weed infestations can be eradicated, and small-scale satellite infestations should be persistently treated with herbicides. Large-scale infestations must be contained using herbicides along infestation borders. Depending on site conditions, the appropriate combination of herbicide, biological control agents, and grazing management can reduce weed populations and weed seed production in large-scale infestations. Competitive forage plants can be maintained with proper grazing rotations that allow plants to recover vigor after disturbance. Monitoring will detect changes in weeds and desirable plants as an integrated weed management plan is implemented. Management adjustments can be made to address the changing conditions. A key component of any IWM program is sustained effort, constant evaluation, and the adoption of improved strategies.



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