

Blaine County Weed Prevention Area Plan

June 2006

Thousands of acres of rangeland are lost each year in Montana to rapidly spreading invasive weeds. These aggressive, non-native plants are the single greatest threat to rangeland stability and continued cattle production. Invasive weeds seriously impact ranching operations through lost revenue and costly management. Spotted knapweed infests over 4 million acres with noticeable movement towards eastern Montana. This weed alone (there are 27 others) has the potential to seriously impact producer profits, local communities, and rural economies that depend on strong agricultural outcomes and wildlife-based expenditures.

Protection of weed-free rangelands from rapid weed invasion is immediately needed. The development of cooperative Weed Prevention Areas (WPAs) accomplishes this. WPAs maximize efforts and resources by preventing and quickly responding to new weeds as coordinated stakeholder groups. Weed-free landowners are unified and share common goals to protect native plant resources and livelihoods from invasive weeds. WPAs follow the same basic cooperative, local-level strategy of Weed Management Areas where landowners within an area work collectively to manage common weed problems. But WPAs promote a proactive, cost-effective, and successful approach to weeds where weed-free rangelands are aggressively protected from spread and complex and costly weed problems are avoided.

The goal of the Blaine County WPA is to: **Protect and maintain healthy native rangeland ecosystems and associated productive capacity from invasive weeds to sustain continued cattle production and wildlife habitat preservation.** This will ensure rural community endurance as competitive agricultural outcomes and wildlife based expenditures are safeguarded. Rangeland protection from weeds is accomplished by comprehensive prevention and early detection / rapid response strategies and ecosystem management techniques, specific to this WPA. The following measures are regarded as necessary aspects of profitable and continued ranching that work to promote a rangeland economic threshold of "zero tolerance":

- (1) **Prevention strategies** are aimed to greatly reduce the number and frequency of weeds into WPA by interrupting weed pathways and spread vectors:
 - A. **Materials** entering WPA, such as soil and gravel, forage and feed grains, etc., should be certified weed-free. Materials like building logs and corrugated tin panels have been shipped to eastern Montana containing spotted knapweed. If materials are not certified and might be at risk, frequently monitor the site.
 - B. **Increased hunter / fishermen activity** into WPA will increase weed invasion. Regulate hunter activity in Block Management Areas to a "walk-in, drag-out" policy. Vehicles should remain on roads and designated parking areas. All Terrain Vehicles are not allowed. Hunters should thoroughly clean boots, dogs, and horses at a designated area prior to entering BMA. Mandate weed-free forage if horses are used for camping purposes. Certified weed-free forage or feed pellets should be available to purchase. Boats and trailers used by fishermen transport very serious weeds and should be washed before entering water bodies within WPA. A wash station shall be planned for the Breise Brothers Reservoir and the North Chinook Reservoir. Specially-designed brochures shall be produced for distribution to hunters and fishermen using the WPA. Brochures can emphasize the value of the weed-free area and outline that WPA restrictions are not arbitrary nuisances but necessary aspects of rangeland protection and wildlife habitat preservation.
 - C. **Machinery, heavy equipment, and non-local vehicles and ATVs** performing work in WPA may be at high risk of contamination. Seismograph and natural gas equipment frequently leave WPA roads and may be spreading weeds from previous travel through infested sites. Adequately cleaning vehicles and equipment before leaving an infested work site is usually not performed, if performed at all. Seismograph and natural gas companies shall be contacted and special prevention considerations within WPA will be required in their county contracts. Require clean-out paperwork from custom harvesting equipment.
 - D. **Risk reduction fees** could be employed if weed invasions and associated costs



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PROTECTING MONTANA FROM INVASIVE WEEDS

increase as a result of increased visitor / recreationist / hunter activity. These fees help recoup costs and build a WPA rapid response contingency fund.

- E. **Weed-free livestock** should be maintained in WPA to ensure safe movement between weed-free rangelands. Avoid moving cattle from weedy areas into the WPA. If this is not avoidable, hold livestock in an easily accessible "sacrifice" pasture for five to seven days prior to release into weed-free rangeland. Monitor pasture for new weeds each year. Designate a clean-out area for shipping trailers.
- F. **New road construction** within WPA should be evaluated given limiting road construction is a proven approach to reduce invasions and avoid habitat fragmentation, which facilitates weed spread. Temporary roads produced by seismograph activity should be quickly closed to allow vegetation recovery.

- (2) **Early detection / rapid response strategies** are aimed to detect new weeds early and quickly respond while management is still cheap and easy. Implement a "zero tolerance" with weeds by recording location with a GPS unit and reporting location to Blaine County Weed District (consider recognition system). Individual weeds can usually be hand-pulled. Small patches should also be mapped and eradicated with hand pulling, if appropriate, or herbicide treatments. Aggressive follow-up management is necessary to ensure reproduction is stopped completely.
 - A. **High probability sites** within WPA shall be frequently surveyed. These areas include heavy equipment disturbed sites, waste areas, sites away from known seed sources, sites where at-risk forage was spread, and pathways such as roads, waterways, and irrigation canals. County road grader operators work in an effective position to find weeds along roads, as they travel elevated and at a slow speed. These operators should carry a GPS unit and record new weeds to Blaine County Weed District. Critical or rare habitats, such as "hot spots" of native plant diversity, are often vulnerable to invasion and shall be identified and frequently monitored for new weeds. Designated BMA parking areas and hunter-traveled roads should be frequently monitored.
 - B. **Low to moderate probability sites** within WPA shall be surveyed as a daily activity component and periodically as unified survey events.
- (3) **Ecosystem management** works to maximize the persistence of rangeland ecosystems to discourage weed invasion. This includes promotion of natural disturbance regimes, such as fire, that work to prevent or slow invasions, stimulate forage production, suppress shrubs, and increase rangeland diversity and weed resistance. Proper grazing management, such as pasture rotation, altering season of use, promotion of litter accumulation, moderate grazing levels, and multi-species grazing, also work to maximize community persistence. Roadside and waterway integrated vegetation management are important WPA components.
- (4) **Mapping strategies** work to define a starting point and serve as a base for WPA progress and prevention evaluation. Please contact the Blaine County Weed District when an invader is located.

Weed-free rangelands are seriously threatened by rapid weed invasion moving our way. Our individual efforts against weeds are a great start! But to ensure our rangelands, livelihoods, and communities are protected from the permanent and costly impacts of weeds, we must act now as unified groups while management is cheap and easy! This WPA plan guides collective and unified producer efforts to protect common native plant resources from weed spread. If we all implement these proven strategies to keep weeds out, our success is ensured! Talk to your neighbors about weeds and remember...an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

