

What we've learned from Idaho's past

by Roger Batt



Lewis and Clark would not have seen the beautiful but costly purple loosestrife on their expedition.

As our nation celebrates the 200th anniversary of Lewis and Clark's expedition across the North American continent, many have tried to imagine what these explorers found on their journey. As they crossed into a land we now call Idaho, it is certain that they saw many extraordinary things such as abundant wildlife, pristine lakes and rivers and a stunning array of wildflowers and native plants that scattered the landscape.

What they did not see was Yellow starthistle, Purple loosestrife, Dalmatian toadflax, Poison hemlock, Eurasian watermilfoil, Leafy spurge, Spotted knapweed and dozens of other insidious noxious weeds that now inhabit thousands of acres of Idaho's lands.

These invasive plants have turned areas once full of diverse native species into dense stands of monoculture, difficult to penetrate by anyone or anything. Any hiker or hunter who has tried to walk through a field of Yellow starthistle has soon found out that it is like walking into a patch of hypodermic needles leaving a painful and unpleasant experience.

Noxious weeds are a serious issue that need cooperation from landowners, state and federal agencies, farmers and ranchers, conservationists, sportsmen and anyone who cares about our state's agriculture, ecology and economy.

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It is estimated that invasive weeds will impact Idaho's economy by approximately \$300 million this year. Idaho farmers and ranchers spend in the upwards of \$15 million a year to fight this ecological war. And nationwide, noxious weeds are spreading at an alarming rate of 4,600 acres a day if left untreated and are costing our nation's economy approximately \$18 billion annually.

Many of Idaho's listed noxious weed species were introduced into Idaho from other states. Some of these invasive plants were not considered a "priority" for eradication and some are primary examples of how Idaho can learn from its past.

One example is Rush skeletonweed. Native to Eurasia, Rush skeletonweed was first identified near Spokane, Washington in 1938. A five-acre infestation of the weed was first detected in Idaho in 1960 near Banks. This infestation grew to 60 acres by 1962 and to 100 acres by 1965. By 1982, the infested area was estimated at 35,000 acres, having increased at an approximate rate of 80% per year. Now Idaho's lands are infested with approximately 1 million acres of Rush skeletonweed.

Could this have been prevented? The answer is yes, but the reason why Rush skeletonweed was not eradicated was because it was not listed as a "priority" for eradication in 1960. Important tools such as Early Detection and Rapid Response or educational Weed Television Commercials did not exist in 1960.

At the time Rush skeletonweed was first documented in Idaho, there were already weed management programs established, but these programs were not as aggressive as the ones we currently have.

Have we learned from our past? Today, Idaho handles invasive plant species much different. Reports of newly introduced species are not ignored. Priority funding exists for early detection measures. And Idahoans are becoming more educated on the impacts of noxious weeds by organizations such as the Idaho Weed Awareness Campaign, a public information campaign that creates awareness and education about the threats of noxious weeds to Idaho's lands and economy.

Imagine if today's weed control efforts ceased and we left the battlefield. Noxious weeds not only would continue to starve out wildlife and other animals, but crop loss would be significantly higher reducing our own food supply. Lakes and rivers would be infested with aquatic plants that kill fisheries and ruin wetlands. And future generations would not be able to see the beauty that our generation and generations past have seen. To put it bluntly, Idaho would look like one giant weedy and unproductive wasteland.

With plans in place such as Idaho's Strategic Plan for Managing Noxious Weeds, and groups such as the Idaho Weed Awareness Campaign, Cooperative Weed Management Areas, the Idaho Weed Control Association, the Idaho Weed Coordinating Committee and the Idaho Invasive Species Council, Idaho remains at the pinnacle of weed control efforts in the entire Union. Indeed, Idaho has learned a lot from its past.

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