



Invasive plants are everyone's problem

by Donna Fleury

Invasive plants are non-native plants threatening the integrity and economic value of eco-systems across Canada.

Invasive plants decrease land productivity, displace native plants, reduce bio-diversity, damage wildlife habitat and diminish aesthetic values. Losses to the Canadian agriculture and forestry industries from all alien invasive species, including plants, are estimated to be \$7.5 billion. The recently formed Alberta Invasive Plants Council (AIPC) intends to help protect Alberta's eco-system by providing credible information about Alberta's invasive plants and to foster co-operation among stakeholders.

Kim Nielsen, AIPC co-chair and agricultural fieldman for the Clearwater County, has been involved with invasive plants for the past several years, particularly with other municipalities and stakeholders in the eastern slopes of the Alberta Rocky Mountains in an area of forestry, recreation, rangeland and cropland. "We've worked together to address concerns of invasive plants in unsettled areas to the west moving east into crop lands and disturbed areas," he says. "We're pleased to be involved in expanding these efforts into the development of AIPC. Through the collaboration of the wide range of stakeholders we have brought together, we're able to provide a co-ordinated effort into provincial invasive plant strategies."

"The formation of AIPC is added recognition for farmers and adds support to something they've known all along," says Tim Dietzler, agricultural fieldman with the Municipal District of Rocky View and AIPC director representing the Alberta Association of Agricultural Fieldmen. "Agriculture has always addressed invasive plant issues, but now we're starting to see more societal-wide recognition that these things are important." Hopefully the prevention, early detection and rapid response to invasive plants, will occur in

urban areas and other lands to help support what farmers have always been doing.

In Alberta, and across Canada, many natural and urban areas, and areas of other jurisdictions other than farmland, are significantly being affected by invasive plants, which has an impact on agricultural land as well. "AIPC brings stakeholders together to start implementing good integrated weed management practices on all lands," explains Dietzler. "Agriculture is already using scientifically correct practices, including integrated weed management, where as many other sectors of society are not." The increased awareness may help relieve the societal concern of the use of pesticides on significant invasive plants, which would be positive for farmers.

"Other than expanded efforts to controlling invasive plants outside of agriculture, there isn't much new for farmers and shouldn't be any impact on how they do business," says Dietzler. "We're not trying to limit the diversity of introduced agronomic plants that don't have an impact on the environment. However, we may have to

look at new ways of dealing with agronomics that have impacts off of agricultural sites."

Invasive plants can be pretty, but problematic

Caraway is an example of an agricultural crop that has escaped into the native grazing and forest areas in Alberta, causing a lot of problems. "I see caraway as the next biggest threat to pastures and hay fields in Alberta. It will easily encroach onto hay fields and as a contaminant of hay, caraway can readily hitch hike to tame and native range as feed is moved around. This very adaptable plant can take over a piece of good quality native range very quickly," says Nielsen.

Caraway is extremely invasive and can replace grass in a couple of years. Chemical control is very difficult on many grazing lands and livestock will not graze it until after a frost. Examples of the other invasive plants of concern include leafy spurge, toadflax, spotted knapweed and scentless chamomile.

"One of our partners, Sustainable Resource Development, has developed an invasive plants strategy that



Leafy spurge is another invasive scourge.



Caraway is extremely invasive in native range grasses.

addresses those elements including proper control measures," explains Nielsen. The measures may include herbicide application, or more preventative aspects such as requiring all reclamation and other equipment to be cleaned before it goes into a site and scrutinizing seed testing certificates to make sure there is nothing coming on with seed mixes.

Another important initiative is that Alberta Transportation has hired, for the first time, a reclamation specialist to work with all of the big construction reclamation projects in terms of addressing local eco-system and biodiversity needs, ensuring correct plant species are being replanted and other issues. Efforts are also addressing off-road and other recreational users coming onto grazing and protected areas to prevent the transfer of invasive plants back and forth between areas. "The weed-free forage program is another good example which promotes weed-free forage to back-country horse riders that go into our fragile eco-system on trail rides and weekend vacations," says Nielsen.

Currently in Canada, Alberta and British Columbia are the only two provinces with formal invasive plants

organizations. AIPC recently made a presentation to the Manitoba Weed Supervisors Association, who are looking at the issues. "The impetus for AIPC, the British Columbia associations and others in the US came from the North American Weed Management Association (NAWMA)," says Dietzler, who was vice-president of NAWMA in 2000 and president in 2001. "NAWMA has provided significant opportunities for the issues of invasive plants to become public, and to look at some real practical on the ground management practices for invasive plants." NAWMA has members from Mexico, US and over 30 full members from across Canada.

AIPC will be hosting the September 2006 NAWMA Conference in Calgary. The 2001 NAWMA conference was held in Lethbridge. "We're pleased to be able to bring a lot of high powered expertise from the US to the conference," says Nielsen. "With the Canadian Invasive Alien Species Strategy initiated by the federal government, it's also a good time for us to bring awareness to that initiative, particularly the terrestrial plants and plant pests component.

We're excited to be able to showcase some of these Canadian projects that will be at the implementation phase at the 2006 NAWMA conference." The conference is open to anyone who is interested, with a particular focus on practitioners of weed management, including agronomists, land managers from various agencies, agriculture, urban and native lands and other sectors.

The AIPC is a not-for-profit association comprised of representatives from governments, industry and grassroots organizations. AIPC is dedicated to raising awareness about the ecological and economic problems caused by invasive plants. The goals of the council are to increase Albertan's awareness of the impact invasive plants have on the environment, economy and society; foster and facilitate co-operation among invasive plant stakeholders; and provide expert advice and guidance to public, industry and government on invasive plant issues. For more information about AIPC and the NAWMA 2006 Conference, go to: www.invasiveplants.ab.ca ■

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