MNPS and Audubon Petition to List Russian Olive as a Noxious Weed

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from Kelseya, Fall 2008

Russian olive (*Elaeagnus angustifolia*) is a small Eurasian tree that was introduced into North America for horticultural purposes. It tolerates drought as well as saline soils so it has been widely planted for windbreaks as well as wildlife habitat on the Northern Great Plains. Russian olive has been available at most nurseries in Montana, and as recently as 2007, Russian olive was being grown by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation nursery for "conservation" plantings. Unfortunately, Russian olive is a prolific seeder and spreads into riparian areas where it competes with native willows and cottonwoods, sometimes forming impenetrable stands along streams or ditches. It has hard wood and few insect pests so it provides poor habitat for birds, except those like robins and pheasants that eat the fruit. Conservationists have long been concerned about the spread of Russian olive, and it has recently been listed as a noxious weed in Colorado, New Mexico, and Wyoming. A petition to have Russian olive put on the state noxious weed list in Montana was turned down at the start of the decade from fear that it would require landowners to destroy their windbreaks.

This past year the Montana Department of Agriculture established a new category of noxious weed. A Category 4 noxious weed is one that cannot be sold in the state but existing plants do not have to be destroyed. Scotch broom, an ornamental shrub that has become invasive in Washington and Oregon was the first plant to be listed as Category 4 in Montana. This past August the Montana Native Plant Society and Montana Audubon filed a petition with the Montana Department of Agriculture to have Russian olive listed as a Category 4 noxious weed in Montana.

The following are excerpts from the petition. You can view the entire petition by going to the Conservation link on the MNPS website.

In the riparian systems of eastern Montana, Russian olive can fill the niche of late successional canopy dominant. Russian olive is shade tolerant (Campbell and Dick-

Peddie 1964), capable of reproducing beneath a cottonwood canopy or other shaded sites. As cottonwoods decline with age and eventually disappear, Russian olive can continue to reproduce and become the canopy dominant (Lesica and Miles 1999). Green ash is also capable of reproducing in the shade of cottonwood and is the native late successional dominant along major rivers in much of the Northern Great Plains and parts of eastern Montana. Russian olive is ecologically similar to green ash and could replace it where both occur because it grows three times faster in girth than green ash (Lesica and Miles 2001).

Russian olive has adverse effects on agriculture in Montana. It can block the flow of irrigation ditches (Lesica observations in Yellowstone County). Dense infestations of Russian olive make it difficult to move cattle in bottomland pastures. Dense stands of Russian olive can also completely shade out understory plants, decreasing the value of these lands for livestock forage. Russian olive can also spread into low lying pastures, reducing forage production and utilization by livestock.

- From 2005 through 2007, the Bureau of Land Management expended about $500,000 for control of Russian olive in riparian areas (Jennifer Cramer, personal comm.).
- A Russian olive control/demonstration project along the Marias River has received $21,000 in state funding (Warren Kellogg, personal comm.).
- Treasure County removed 100 acres with hand labor at a cost of $1,000/acre (Marias River Watershed Meeting Minutes, January 8, 2008).
- On June 21, 2007, the Yellowstone River Conservation District Council adopted a recommendation for Russian olive management in the Yellowstone River Valley that states, “Russian olive should not be planted in the Yellowstone River valley, and where it currently exists, Russian olive should be controlled or eradicated.” Several removal demonstration projects have been initiated since this recommendation was approved.