

Montana's National Forests... Natives and Weeds

by Anne Banks

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As you read this, all nine of Montana's National Forests are in the process of revising their Forest Management Plans. Forests nationwide are required to go through this process every ten years, and because of the amount of time required for the revision process, its effects will remain in place for at least the next fifteen years.

Why should this matter to Montana Native Plant Society members? Forest Plans guide management of noxious and non-native invasive plants, a significant issue from the perspective of native plant conservation.

The Forest Service is aware of the dangers posed by these weedy invaders. Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth recently identified the spread of noxious weeds as one of the "four great issues facing forest lands."

The Forest Service publication, *Stemming the Invasive Tide*, states: "The problem of noxious weeds and non-native invasive species threatens every aspect of ecosystem health and productivity.... The increasingly devastating effects include reducing biological diversity, impacting threatened and endangered species and wildlife habitat, modifying vegetative seral stages, changing fire and nutrient cycles, and degrading soil structure."

Weed seeds are transported by wind and water, animal fur, feathers and feces, but primarily by people. By far the greatest vector for spread is a motorized vehicle—cars, trucks, ATVs, motorcycles, and even snowmobiles. A single vehicle driven several feet through a knapweed site can acquire up to 2,000 seeds, 200 of which may still be attached after 10 miles of driving (Montana Knapweeds: Identification, Biology and Management, MSU Extension Service.) Off-road vehicles are designed to—and do—travel off-trail, disturbing soil, creating weed seedbeds, and dispersing seeds widely.

The roadless lands of our national forests, however, are relatively free of non-native invasive plant species, and so serve as both a *refugium* for, and a reservoir of, native plant species. A 2003 University of California, Davis study shows that “roadless habitats have multiple benefits, not just for the environment but also for the economy and our quality of life. They are not only refuges for biodiversity, but also protect against non-native weed invasions, which are costly for ranchers and public agencies.”

The Forest Service is responsible for the prevention, control and eradication of noxious weeds in national forests. The most effective way to control weeds is to prevent their introduction by limiting motorized use to designated routes outside of roadless areas.

Take time to help stop the spread of noxious weeds. Let your Forest Supervisor know that keeping roadless areas free of weed-spreading ORVs will best prevent weed introduction and preserve native plants, thus benefiting every aspect of forest health. “The natural vegetative communities that have evolved here are the key to all life in our forests...the basic fabric that holds the ecosystems together” (*Weed Pocket Guide*, Greater Yellowstone Coordinating Committee).

You can find out what’s happening with revision of the Management Plan in your national forest by visiting its web site at [http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/name of your forest](http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/name%20of%20your%20forest) (i.e. “Helena” or “Bitterroot”, or by calling your ranger district or Forest Supervisor’s office. Get on your National Forest’s mailing list to receive up-to-date information on its plan’s progress, times and dates for public hearings, and opportunities to comment. Others with less respect for our natural heritage will voice their opinions—make sure that yours is heard as well!

GET INVOLVED!! WHO TO CONTACT:

Beaverhead-Deerlodge NF

Thomas K. Reilly

420 Barrett Street, Dillon, MT 59725

(406) 683-3900 Fax: (406) 683-3855

Bitterroot NF

Dave Bull

1801 N. 1st St., Hamilton, MT 59840

(406) 363-7121 Fax: (406) 363-7159

Custer NF

Nancy T. Curriden

1310 Main St., Billings, MT 59105

(406) 657-6200 Fax: (406) 657-6222

Flathead NF

Cathy Barbouletos

1935 3rd Ave. E., Kalispell, MT 59901

(406)758-5200 Fax: (406) 758-5363

Gallatin NF

Becky Heath

Federal Building, 10 E. Babcock Ave., Box 130, Bozeman, MT 59771

(406) 587-6701 Fax: (406) 587-6758

Helena NF

Thomas Clifford

2880 Skyway Drive, Helena, MT 59601

(406) 449-5201 Fax: (406) 449-5436

Kootenai NF

Bob Castaneda

1101 Highway 2 W., Libby, MT 59923

(406) 293-6211 Fax: (406) 293-7710

Lewis and Clark NF

Vacant

P.O. Box 869, 1101 15th Street N., Great Falls, MT 59403

(406) 791-7701 Fax: (406) 761-1972

Lolo NF

Debbie Austin

Building 24, Fort Missoula

Missoula, MT 59804

(406) 329-3804 Fax: (406) 329-3795