

Interagency Cooperation for Noxious Weed Control

**Anne Knox
Bureau of Land Management
2135 Butane Drive, Sacramento, CA 95825**

I am going to share something with you this morning and it just might shock you. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in California has a noxious weed problem. However, that's not the shocking part. The shocking part is that the BLM does not have enough money to control all of the weeds. That's right: even with almost a quarter of a million dollars in budgetary funding for noxious weed management in 1998, and even with hundreds of thousands of dollars more in grant money, we cannot control all of the weeds that are infesting BLM lands.

Luckily for us, and for you, the BLM is not the only agency in California trying to combat noxious weeds. One look around the room today proves that. We are all here because we recognize a common problem and want to be part of a collaborative solution. There is an amazing wealth of talent present in this room and in this state. If somehow we could magically combine all of the noxious weed funding and qualified personnel that are in California then we could definitely make a dent in the noxious weed problem. But in reality, the dollars and the personnel are spread out, unequally, among a diversity of agencies. These agencies are all fighting on the same side of the war, but some are armed with bare hands and others with brand new 4-wheel-drive ATV-mounted spray equipment. Now if we want to move beyond fighting individual battles in order to concentrate on winning the war, then we really need to combine our forces and present a unified front. Now I know what you're thinking, "I don't even know everything my OWN agency is doing about noxious weeds, let alone what other agencies are doing." And that is the problem.

In today's information age there is no reason why we cannot be aware of what is going on in this state. It takes less than one minute to e-mail a document to hundreds of people. Tomorrow you will hear about a new noxious weed database that will allow you to enter project information in a matter of minutes. It is no longer acceptable to claim ignorance as an excuse for inaction. Unfortunately, most of the projects that we do hear about are well-known and have published papers about their successes. While I do believe that it is every agency's obligation to publish papers and to attend symposia like this one, it is equally important to publicize failed projects. There is no reason why an ineffective control method should be used twice. Remember that our children will be carrying on this effort, and without a paper trail to lead them they will be bound to repeat our mistakes.

If everyone in this room could take the time this coming year to document all weed projects for inclusion on the Noxious Weed Database then our cumulative success rate would surely increase as a result of being able to quickly determine who is doing what in California. We all need to focus on increasing the quantity and improving the quality of information available on noxious weed management. Communication is always the first major step towards cooperation. The challenge of controlling noxious weeds often seems overwhelming but when we can share our experience and knowledge with others, the burden doesn't seem so hard to bear. It's good to know that we are in this together, for the long haul.

Communication also aids in setting priorities. We are dealing with a laundry list of noxious weeds in California, and it is logistically impossible to fight all of them at once. What are your agency's top ten weed species? When we have a common enemy, it becomes easier to focus our energy where it will do the most good. Where should research efforts be focused? It makes more sense to satisfy one need rather than many wants. The longer that we take to get organized, the harder it will be to combat those weeds that have spread beyond our control.

In addition, when the agencies can present a unified front it becomes easier for private and non-profit organizations to back us. This process of setting priorities needs to be done at both the local and the state level if we are to achieve the small victories that spur us on while preserving the vision and the foresight necessary to

win the war. It's very easy to become discouraged at the local level and sidetracked at the statewide level unless you have clear priorities to guide you. Once we have established priorities, it will become easier to coordinate involvement in noxious weed surveys, prevention efforts, research, and public education. Since these efforts benefit everyone in the state, they need to be coordinated in order to reduce overlaps in effort and increase the overall quality of the work being done. It also makes sense to develop interagency training courses in inventory, monitoring, treatment, and control. Our ultimate goal should be to ensure that management for noxious weeds is carried out efficiently and consistently across jurisdictional and political boundaries.

If I have failed so far to convince you of the benefits of interagency cooperation, then perhaps I need to speak on the subject that is near to every bureaucrat's heart - money. Last year the BLM received more money for noxious weed control through grants than through its normal budget process, and this certainly was not due to luck. We have been training our field offices in the art of grant writing, and we always stress one important component that is guaranteed to make any grant proposal successful: coordination. Maybe you have been plugging away at a piece of land for years without ever getting a dime of grant money and you wonder why you have such lousy luck. Actually the reason is because no granting organization worth their charter is going to sink thirty grand into a black hole. There is no "I" in weed control, but there a "We."

If you can demonstrate that your project involves more than just your own agency, has priority with other entities, and will provide information that others can use (sound familiar?), then your proposal will rise above typically short-sighted proposals and get funded. You cannot and should not do it entirely on your own. We are all publicly funded agencies and we have an obligation to the people of this state to consider the entire state's needs when planning for every project, every time. That includes involving every interested agency or affected entity in weed control projects. That includes promoting public awareness and public participation. That also includes publicizing the results of your control project, whether it was a success or a disaster.

Efforts to coordinate conservation-related programs among Federal, state, and local agencies in California are not new. Most of these efforts began with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), a non-legally binding document that relies upon the good faith efforts of the signatory agencies to sustain it. In 1987 a group of Federal and state agencies took the first major step in this state by signing the "MOU on Coordinated Resource Management and Planning in California." In 1991, the "MOU on Biological Diversity" was signed by representatives of 10 Federal, state, and local governments as a commitment to cooperative ecosystem management.

Today, there are 37 members of the California Biodiversity Council, including representatives from the Regional Supervisors Association. In 1996, the "MOU for the Coordination of the Management of Undesirable Plants on Federal and State Lands" was forged, and currently 15 state and Federal agencies have signed on. As a result of this MOU, the California Interagency Noxious Weed Coordinating Committee was forged, and has been meeting four times a year since early 1996. The major product to date has been the noxious weed database that you will hear about tomorrow, but an equally important product is the establishment of a forum for active discussion and debate on noxious weed issues, projects, and priorities.

Each signatory of the MOU has agreed to share information on undesirable plant species and various methods of prevention and control. I encourage each of you to find out who your agency representative is on this committee, and to support the exchange of information between agencies. One thing that I have found to be true of MOU efforts is that each agency gains in direct proportion to what is contributed. Besides the statewide MOU, there are also several regional MOUs on noxious weed control that have been signed, and I'm sure that number will continue to grow.

So how can you, as an individual, get involved in interagency noxious weed control? The best way is to help organize a Noxious Weed Management Area that is based upon biological or geographical boundaries rather than legal boundaries. Invite representatives from all management agencies and private landowner groups to become part of the Management Area. These cooperators can then locally prioritize species and coordinate prevention, mapping, control, and monitoring programs within the context of the Management Area. While one agency or landowner may lose some autonomy in a Weed Management Area, in the end everyone will gain efficiency and increase their chances of success. Once priorities have been set, cooperators can then combine equipment and expertise in order to more effectively manage noxious weeds within the area.

The formation of a Weed Management Area is also a great way to present a unified front to legislators, the public and granting organizations. Proposals submitted under the umbrella of a Weed Management Area will always get priority over individual agency submissions. For more information on forming Weed Management Areas, I encourage you to read the "Guidelines for Coordinated Management of Noxious Weeds in the Greater Yellowstone Area," a landmark document produced by all of the entities in the Montana, Wyoming, Idaho area. The formula is simple and effective, and you have nothing to lose but the weeds.

In order for cooperative noxious weed management projects to work, the agencies need to be able to rely on the continued efforts of the private and non-profit organizations that have been so instrumental in bringing the noxious weed issue to the attention of legislators, land managers, and the general public. Agency priorities are driven by public demand, and it seems that noxious weeds are finally getting the desperately needed attention that they deserve. We need to maintain that focus through education and by sharing our successes and failures with the public. As soon as public support wanes, so will our noxious weed budgets. We cannot let this opportunity pass us by. As you all know, one dollar spent on weed control today is five dollars saved for the future. Will future generations be able to control infestations that are currently growing at exponential rates?

I have heard it said that eventually we will all learn to live with noxious weeds, that they are here to stay and we shouldn't waste money on a hopeless battle. Perhaps the weeds will win in the end, but for those of you who have seen firsthand the amazing beauty of California's wildlands, I ask you: are you willing to face that prospect without a fight? Should future generations have to face that prospect because of our inability to fulfill our agency mandates today? I hope that everyone here today will challenge that vision of the future, and stand united in defense of the quality of our land and the quality of our lives.

In conclusion, I would like to challenge each of you to reach out to other agencies by sharing information on your noxious weed projects, determining mutual priorities, and initiating cooperative weed projects that cross several jurisdictional boundaries. Every individual in this room recognizes the severity of the noxious weed problem in California and the need to act quickly and in a coordinated manner. It is up to each of us to move beyond policy differences and involve others in our efforts. One person and one agency can make a difference, but it will take a coordinated team effort to make THE difference.