

Keeping Invasive Species out of Native Prairie

Submitted by Leanne Thompson for SK PCAP

Invasive plant species can be defined as non-native plants which are introduced outside of their natural habitat. In this new environment, free from natural ‘enemies’, invasive plants have an advantage that allows them to out compete native plants for space, moisture and nutrients. This represents a real threat to biodiversity on native prairie as well as productive capacity, economic value, and aesthetics of the land.

For native prairie, invasive plants include both “weeds” (ex. leafy spurge, downey brome, Canada thistle, common burdock) and non-native grasses such as smooth brome grass and crested wheatgrass. The result of invasive species can be devastating especially to natural areas when left uncontrolled. As just one example, a 2010 report estimates there are 1.2 million acres of leafy spurge in Manitoba representing an economic impact of \$40.2 million, \$10.2 million of which is associated with the reduction in carrying capacity for livestock grazing.

In Saskatchewan, various groups are working to reduce the threat of invasive species and the resulting adverse effects on native habitat. One such group is the Saskatchewan Invasive Species Council (SISC) - a non-profit association of professionals from federal, provincial, municipal governments, industry and non-government organizations. The SISC was formed in 2008 to address the lack of coordination and understanding associated with invasive species within the province of Saskatchewan and across Canada. This group has a mandate that includes increasing awareness and understanding of invasive species issues and encouraging action to detect, prevent and manage invasive species. Their website (www.saskinvasives.ca) includes a wide variety of information on invasive species in the form of factsheets, image links and news and current events. In addition, sightings/locations of invasive plants can be reported on this website.

As land managers, identification and timely control of invasive species are key to the reduction and prevention of their spread. To help correctly identify invasive species, the *Saskatchewan Invasive Plant Species Identification Guide* was recently updated and can be found on the Saskatchewan Forage Council website at www.saskforage.ca. This full color field guide provides images and descriptions of over twenty invasive plants in both vegetative and flowering forms. To order a hard copy, please contact the SFC office at (306) 867-8126.

The invasive species identification guide is part of a larger project undertaken by the Saskatchewan Forage Council (SFC) in 2010 with the purpose of increasing awareness of invasive species and the damage they cause as well as the development of programs to prevent the introduction of these species and reduce their spread. In addition to the ID guide, several factsheets were developed to address invasive plants in different production areas and land uses including forage seed, hay, transportation, grazing, and riparian areas. All five factsheets are available on the SFC website or may be ordered in hard copy by contacting the SFC office.

These factsheets provide practical, producer focused information including Beneficial Management Practices (BMP’s) for control and prevention of invasive plants. BMP’s such as developing an inspection and monitoring plan, sourcing certified weed-free seed, implementing integrated control methods, and making the decision to not sell or use hay containing viable weeds, are a few of the proposed measures to reduce the spread and avoid introduction of invasive plants.

Invasive species are often first detected in disturbed areas or areas where existing plants are under stress. Therefore, one of the best ways to reduce the impact of invasive plants is to maintain native prairie in healthy condition. Healthy condition prairie will ensure that native plants are vigorous and will promote the growth of preferred species.

In short, regular inspection, proper control methods and using carefully sourced inputs and materials should all have a part in native prairie management plans to maintain the integrity, biodiversity and beauty of these valuable natural areas.

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