

A Bear Trap Rite of Spring

story and photos by David Early, Dillon Field Office

Every spring since 2002, a couple dozen BLM staffers and Madison County weed crew members have shouldered backpack sprayers and headed upstream along the banks of the Madison River in the Bear Trap Wilderness.

On May 14, 27 people, and two horses once again did battle with a stubborn and persistent foe: spotted knapweed. Fanning out along about five miles of the river corridor, teams of four to six applied herbicide to early spring rosettes in what has become a rite of spring.

In the fall of 2001, John Simons (state weed program lead and former Dillon Field Office resource management specialist), Pat Fosse (Dillon FO assistant field manger), and Mike Mooney (Dillon FO weed coordinator) walked up the river trail and were dismayed by a vast sea of purple flowers. Because the Bear Trap is designated wilderness, using airplanes, helicopters, and/or 4-wheelers to apply herbicide to the landscape-level infestation was not an option. Although somewhat skeptical, they agreed that the only way to attack the problem was with backpack sprayers, tenacity, and strong backs. As Pat said when commenting on the initial decision to go for it, "We had no choice; we just had to get started and eat the elephant one bite at a time."

The patient and persistent effort is showing very encouraging results. Most of the crew reported the number of rosettes vastly reduced, and many of last season's standing skeletons are without any green basal growth.

"Our consistent effort is paying off," said Mike Mooney. "We are beginning to exhaust the large seed bank in the ground. Knapweed populations can be eradicated, but it takes a long term commitment because the seeds remain viable in the soil for a long time."

Freed from his computer screen in Billings for a day in the field, John Simons enjoyed strapping on a backpack and working the riverbank. When asked if he noticed any difference since he last participated in a Bear Trap spray day John simply said, "Definitely! I never thought we could do this with just back packs, but then again I did not envision 30 people on the ground twice a year. It's great."

A second spray day also takes place every summer during the height of the growing season in July.



Weed coordinator Mike Mooney readies the backpack sprayers for Dillon employees and cooperators to attack infestations along the Madison River in the Bear Trap Wilderness.



Steve Lubinski, Jonathan Hockett, and Aly Piwowar add water to their sprayers before looking for noxious weeds – mostly spotted knapweed and hounds tongue.



The whole crew! Participants found fewer weed infestations this year, proof that aggressive treatment does pay off.

<http://www.blm.gov/mt/st/en/info/newsroom/steward/08summer/beartrap.print.html>