

Funding cut for noxious-weed program

*Written by Alexander MacLean
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Statewide budget cuts have severely crippled programs intended to battle the spread of an invasive weed that is a thorn in the side of ranchers, hikers and foresters in the Central Sierra.

The California Department of Food and Agriculture's budget was reduced by \$19 million in 2011-2012, with the department facing additional cuts of \$12 million in the upcoming budget year. The cuts eliminated \$2.7 million from the state's weed control budget, including all funding for the Yellow Starthistle Leading Edge Project.

The project aimed to curb the spread of yellow starthistle in higher elevations by mapping areas affected by the invasive weed and coordinating with 14 counties in the Sierra Nevada region on eradication efforts.

The Department of Food and Agriculture calls the yellow starthistle "one of the most ecologically and economically damaging invasive plants" in the state.

Not only does the unwanted plant degrade land by absorbing groundwater and threatening native species, it also poses serious fire risks on forest lands and poisons horses that eat enough of it.

The weed is believed to have been introduced to North America through the import of contaminated alfalfa seeds from Chile during the California Gold Rush.

A balanced part of the ecosystem in its native land, yellow starthistle rapidly spread and invaded the territories of other plant species when it was introduced to the state without its natural predators, said Rebecca Miller-Cripps of the University of California Cooperative Extension Natural Resources Program.

Experts estimate yellow starthistle now covers more than 12 million acres across the state in mostly lower elevations, but its presence has been creeping into the Sierra Nevada mountain range.

Miller-Cripps said the highest she's seen yellow starthistle this year was just past Little Sweden on Highway 108.

"It's terrible," she said. "It's growing wild along most of the highways and county roads."

Miller-Cripps had been working on a project to map areas affected by the invasive weed in Tuolumne and Amador counties, but funding for that ran out at the end of last year.

Her role since has been to coordinate with agricultural departments in various counties, who have largely said they don't have the money for eradication efforts.

There are opportunities to continue funding weed control projects through private or federal grant programs, but Miller-Cripps said those can be highly competitive.

The Sierra Nevada Conservancy had hundreds of requests this year for wildland rehabilitation and weed eradication projects, including one proposed by Miller-Cripps that she said was designed to keep weeds along Highway 120 from encroaching on Yosemite National Park.

Miller-Cripps said her project was not one of those selected for funding.

She noted that yellow starthistle isn't the only threatening species allowed to flourish due to a lack of resources. Other weeds invading the Mother Lode include the Scotch and French brooms, which are flowering shrubs that can be seen off Stockton Road leading to Highway 108 in Sonora and up Old Priest Grade to the gates of Yosemite National Park.

"Funding for weed management areas has been reduced so much that many are either inactive or treated as adjunct to other staffing duties," Miller-Cripps said.

Residents can contribute to the solution by pulling out starthistle before it seeds. Miller-Cripps said simply breaking the plant off at ground level will prevent it from growing back.

Stanislaus National Forest spokesman Jerry Snyder said he's aware of the yellow starthistle problem but wasn't sure whether the Forest Service received state funding for any specific programs to battle its spread on forest lands.

"It's pretty prolific," he said, adding that he's heard of the weed being spotted even in higher-elevation areas near mountain passes.

The Jenkins Starthistle Broadcast Prescribed Burn in the Groveland Ranger District is expected to be ignited either the week of June 4 or 11, depending on the weather.

The 15-acre burn about nine miles southeast of Greeley Hill along Forest Road 2S05 adjacent to Jenkins Ranch is intended to reduce and control the presence of the troublesome weed and re-establish native plants and grasses while also reducing dead starthistle fuels.

A simultaneous burn with the same objectives called the Jordan Starthistle Broadcast Prescribed Burn is proposed about four miles east of Greeley Hill.

Snyder said many places where the weed is found in the forest are sensitive areas where burns rather than chemical spraying are better methods of treatment. The wheels of off-road vehicles can also carry starthistle seeds throughout dirt trails and back roads deep in the forest, he said.

While the spread of yellow starthistle poses a threat to forests and native ecosystems, local veterinarians say horse owners should also be wary of the thorny pest.

Dr. Wes Wittman, of Mono Way Veterinary Hospital in Sonora, said the toxin in yellow starthistle kills a certain portion of a horses' brain when ingested for prolonged periods of time.

Yellow starthistle poisoning, sometimes called "chewing disease," destroys the part of a horses' brain allowing it to chew and swallow. The damage can't be reversed and the horse will eventually die of starvation, Wittman said.

"Once you see signs of it, the only thing that can be done is to humanely put them down," he said.

Wittman said a horse displaying signs of the disease may frequently yawn, make chewing motions without food in its mouth or act as if something is caught in its throat. He also said symptoms can include the inability to eat or drink, drowsiness and spitting out food.

Horses don't naturally seek out starthistle when it's present, but they may resort to eating the dangerous plant when grasses have been mostly grazed toward the end of summer. Also, ranchers may unknowingly bail it amongst hay gathered near roadsides where the weed typically grows, Wittman said.

In Wittman's 30 years treating horses in the area, he said he's never seen one case of the disease, but budget cuts to programs keeping the weeds at bay causes some concern.

Wittman said many of his clients who own horses took advantage of the state-funded program reimbursing them for purchasing herbicides that eradicated yellow starthistle.

"Now without the funding, I think there will be an increased risk, especially over the next few years," he said. "Because one thing about the starthistle is that it spreads like wildfire once it starts."

Wittman said ranchers who can't afford to purchase the herbicides themselves can still be diligent by isolating horses from fields where starthistle is growing and checking to make sure it doesn't get bailed up in hay.