

Canada Thistle and Hound's Tongue

Clayton McCracken

The problem of Canada Thistle

Canada thistle was likely introduced to the Crooked Creek Corridor in straw used to mulch the steep hillsides following the Red Waffle Fire of July 2002. By 2012 Canada thistle was along the road banks and in dense stands in the meadows. In mid August 2012 the Forest Service thoroughly sprayed the dense infestations.

By the spring of 2013 there was an extensive spread of newly emerging Canada thistle plants from seeds dispersed from those dense patches. The most effected meadows were Cattle go to Crooked Creek, Tibbs Hollow and the Brush Pile Site. (Refer to attached table.)

In June, 2013 Sean Monahan for the Forest Service trained Clayton McCracken, as a volunteer from the Pryors Weed Campaign, to spray Canada thistle and provided a backpack sprayer and the herbicide, Milestone (aminopyralid).

During the summer the volunteer made six trips to the Pryors to spray.

He spent a total of 58 hours actually spraying. That does not include time for travel, mixing spray and other necessary breaks. In the Crooked Creek Corridor seven off road sites and the road banks on six miles of road were sprayed. In addition, three sites off the Pryor Mountain Road were sprayed. The Cattle go to Crooked Creek Site, which was targeted, was sprayed on five different trips for a total of 23 hours.

Even though all of the emerging Canada thistle at any given site would be spot sprayed and killed, three weeks later just as many new plants had emerged. Aminopyralid is most effective on thistles that are in a growth phase. Returning to spray a site again in three weeks when new plants are emerging seemed to be very effective. Using volunteers to spray a targeted site every three weeks may be the most effective way to control or perhaps eliminate an infestation.

Great progress was made controlling Canada thistle at certain sites. That effort would go for naught, if those sites were left to revert back to extensive dense infestations.

The widespread and dense infestation in Tibbs Hollow, though partially sprayed on two occasions, was never completely sprayed by the volunteer. During the month of July cattle grazed down the Canada thistle to the point that spraying would have been useless. There will be a horrendous infestation in the Tibbs Hollow meadow in 2014. We recommend targeting Tibbs Hollow for intensive treatment as was done with the Cattle go to Crooked Creek Site in 2013.

Cattle when left long enough on a pasture will graze the Canada thistle to the ground. When the Canada thistle is so grazed, it can not be treated with a herbicide. It is recommended that someone with a backpack sprayer work the Cattle go to Crooked Creek, Tibbs Hollow, Brush Pile, and East Mill Hollow Sites two weeks before cattle are turned into the pastures and again every 3 weeks after they have been moved off.

There are sites where there are still dense patches of Canada thistle. Consider treating these patches early in the spring with a pre-emergent herbicide. There are three dense patches in Bridge Hollow that have never been treated and a patch in the East Meadow of Mill Hollow that was treated late in the summer that would be candidates for pre-emergent treatments. This is an idea that has to be researched.

To eliminate the Canada thistle on the road banks we recommend Crooked Creek Road be walked up and down by a person with a backpack sprayer twice in a season, in late June and late July. Here again this is a project that would be feasible only with committed volunteers.

The volunteer in 2013 accomplished much and learned a great deal. His work provides a foundation upon which we can build our Campaign in 2014. We would like to have a few more volunteers spraying and target more sites for intensive treatment.



It is not a matter of bragging. If a 81 year old man can go up into the Pryors, sleep out on the ground so he can be up with the sun and be spraying by 7 AM or if he sprays until it is too dark at 9 PM - then anyone, if dedicated to eliminating those aggressively invasive noxious weeds from our mountain meadows, can do the same.

Cultivate and utilize volunteers. A committed volunteer can work flexible hours and thereby accomplish tasks that a government employee can not.

That is not to denigrate those who work for the government. Volunteers can be an invaluable supplemental resource.

A detailed report of the spraying effort has been given Terry Jones and Sean Monahan.

A table of off road Canada thistle sites with comments is attached.

Hound's Tongue

Hound's tongue is a pernicious weed. Cattle will not eat hound's tongue supposedly because of its odor. Hound's tongue is hepatotoxic and has been lethal for horses. Hound's tongue shows in three annual phases. The new plant emerges from seed and forms a rosette. The second year the plant bolts forming a flowering stalk. Within days there are green nutlets. These nutlets, still green, will adhere to clothing. By the third year the stalk stands dark brown and dead while loaded with viable seeds ready to latch on to any mammal and be dispersed wherever that mammal might wander.

In many places in the Pryors the hound's tongue is no longer present as scattered single plants but it is in masses.

It is sad to be eliminating Canada thistle and see the meadow taken over by hound's tongue. Canada thistle might decrease the grazing potential of a meadow by competing with the grasses. However, cows do eat the thistles. Hound's tongue, as dense as it is becoming, will definitely reduce the grazing potential of the meadows.

It would take a small army to dig out all the hound's tongue. In 2014 we can select a few meadows for an intense effort of hound's tongue pulling.

Fewer volunteers with backpack sprayers might do the job in less time and with less effort. Could hound's tongue be sprayed with the same herbicide with which a volunteer is spraying Canada thistle?

We would like to have a conversation about what can be done to control hound's tongue and how volunteers can contribute to that effort.

Clayton McCracken
3227 Country Club Circle
Billings MT 59102
406-252-2807
chme9@bresnan.net