

Saving the Smith: *In One of Montana's Most Pristine River Corridors an Organization Heads the Effort against Noxious Weeds and the Potential Consequences Facing Ranchers, Floaters and the Environment.*

By Simon Perkins

Twelve miles west of the small town of White Sulphur Springs, Highway 360 turns from pavement to dirt. Five miles later, another dirt road turns north, winding for fifteen minutes before arriving at a left-hand turn that descends to the Camp Baker put-in on the Smith River. From here, the Smith River meanders north and drops into a fifty-mile canyon stretch where it splits the Big Belt and Little Belt mountain ranges. Eventually, the steep rock faces give way to rolling hills and pastures and the river flows through the McKamey Ranch, five miles upriver of the Eden Bridge take-out.

Ken McKamey and his wife, Phyllis, own the 10,000-acre ranch and lease an additional 9,000 acres further upstream. The ranch dates back to 1890, as a homestead acquired by George Colby. Colby hired Ken's grandfather in the 1930s to manage the property, and in 1965 his grandfather bought out Mr. Colby and incorporated the ranch. Historically, the place operated primarily as a sheep farm. However, over the last few years, Ken and Phyllis have included more cattle.

On a brisk winter day in January, I sat with Ken and Phyllis at their kitchen table, sipping coffee and eating homemade brownies. Ken sat across from me with his arms on the wood table. His salt and pepper mustache sloped down around the corners of his mouth and his short hair sat high above his light blue eyes. He wore blue jeans and a big silver belt buckle engraved with the ranch's insignia, an upside down R.

Phyllis sat at the head of the table with her hands in her lap. To my right sat Sherry Meador, project coordinator for the Smith River Habitat Project (SHRP), a private, nonprofit organization formed in 2003 focused on “work[ing] in collaboration with public and private entities to positively impact the Smith River corridor.”

We were talking about weeds, or rather “invasive plants” according to proper ecological terminology. The Smith River corridor is home to four critical invasive species: leafy spurge, spotted knapweed, houndstongue, and Dalmatian toadflax. Leafy spurge poses the biggest threat to the corridor. The pale yellow-green plant speckles fields and hills along the river and proves to be very difficult to manage—its taproot can grow up to thirty feet in length, making it nearly impossible to pull. Treating, controlling, and preventing the spread of leafy spurge and other invasive noxious weeds has not only been the primary focus of SRHP, but also the basis for its origination. But for Ken, weed management has been a lifelong objective.

“I was told my dad was spraying weeds the day I was born,” Ken said as his face widened into a smile. He put down his cup of coffee and looked at Phyllis. “He started spraying as early as the 1950s.”

Ken’s dad recognized the threat of noxious weeds and passed this interest on to his son, specifically regarding the economic implications. “You can’t sell the hay when leafy spurge gets in the field,” Ken said. “The weeds just take over everything.”

Ken hasn’t lost a field to noxious weeds yet, but only because he works at it constantly. Throughout his daily routines, Ken keeps a close eye out for any new invasions. Leafy spurge, like many noxious weeds, can spread quickly and over great distances. The seed hitchhikes on many carriers, specifically vehicles, which explains

why drivers often see the yellow flowered plant bordering roads and rest areas. In Ken's case, he also worries about the river's fluctuating water levels. "Whenever you have floods or high water, you run the risk of getting seeds."

Ken's interest and dedication to weed management inspired him to join the board of SRHP. The organization works with landowners along the Smith River and Tenderfoot Creek (one of the river's major tributaries) in a collaborated effort against invasive weeds. The first line of defense is education. Leafy spurge and other invasive species displace and suffocate native and desirable plant species. Regarding this aggressive nature, experts often compare weed invasions to wildfires. "It's out there and it's moving fast," says Jim Freeman, Cascade County Weed District supervisor. "It can take over an area quickly if it is not dealt with."

Celestine Duncan, head of Weed Management Services in Helena, feels a need to qualify the analogy. "In certain ways, noxious weeds can be much worse than a wildfire. Land can regenerate after a fire and often the result is a new, healthy ecosystem. When noxious weeds consume an area, they have a dominating and sometimes permanent effect, which can be devastating." So why then do wildfires receive much more publicity, specifically in the media? Why don't people talk about invasive plants in the checkout line at the supermarket? "Weeds don't burn anybody's house down," says Duncan.

The impact of invasive species is widespread. Environmentally, weeds alter plant communities and threaten water and soil quality as well as native ecosystems. "Not only do invasive weeds push out the native plants and wildlife that rely on those plants, but other non-native species can potentially move in," says Duncan. And, as indicated by

Ken McKamey, weeds can also diminish a land's agricultural and economic worth.

"Noxious species, specifically leafy spurge, decrease land values," says Freeman.

"Everyone is looking to get a useful product from their lot. You don't want to risk this value. That's why it is important to minimize the spread."

SRHP works hard to assist land owners with their weed management in the Smith River corridor. Treatment tactics include pulling weeds (except in the case of leafy spurge), grazing (sheep and goats will eat spurge and other weeds), mowing, biocontrol with specific insects, and spraying. Herbicides are generally the most popular treatment, as they usually provide the fastest results. However, within the Smith River corridor, riparian restrictions allow only specific chemicals and place certain limitations according to the proximity of the river. In this case, landowners often use a combination of different treatments to manage weed populations.

But with treatment comes costs. To reduce the financial burden on landowners, SRHP acquires specific state grants for weed management. The grants reimburse half the landowner's expenses. But sometimes, even before money becomes an issue, landowners need to be persuaded to believe in the process. Melissa Brown is a private weed consultant in Bozeman and spent time working for Duncan after graduating from the University of Montana in 1996. She suggests that the biggest hurdle lies in the "daunting aspect" of weed management. "Some landowners, when told they have a weed problem, feel overwhelmed, like they can't do anything about it. We need to explain the idea that there are very practical and realistic ways to manage invasive weed species."

Ken McKamey agrees. “People can get frustrated because they spray and spray one year and the weeds come back the next,” he says. “You need to keep with it. You don’t look at it as weed *eradication*, you look at it as weed *control*.”

Ken serves as an example, showing that weed management is not only practical, but well worth the commitment. His strategy revolves around “immediate action” once he discovers an invasive species on his property. On average, Ken treats one hundred to two hundred acres of leafy spurge every year. When he locates an “infestation,” Ken sprays the plant, usually with the herbicide Tordon, and then works his way around the infested area. “You’re supposed to spray at least seven or eight feet around the outer plants,” Ken says. “You may kill a small amount of crop or native plant, but it is well worth it in the end. A lot more is at risk if the spurge goes untouched.”

The McKamey Ranch has benefited significantly from dedicated weed management. One example lies out Ken’s back window. “There’s a field across the river here,” he says, raising his eyebrows. “It was solid spurge when I got out of college and came back to the ranch. We committed ourselves to it, year after year, and now it’s clear and we put it into alfalfa.”

Ken does his own spraying. But many landowners contract out their weed management. As Weed District Supervisor for Cascade County, Freeman treats numerous private properties in his district, which comprises the downstream half of the Smith River. The responsibility of the upstream half falls to Otto Olson.

Olson is the weed district supervisor for Meagher County. A retired federal employee, Olson now dedicates his time to treating infested areas and upholding his district’s weed management standard. “Meagher County is, as far as population, a small

county,” Olson says. “And it is a county that is very weed conscious. Weed management is a high priority with the ranchers. There is a very active program here. Meagher County has something to be very proud of.” In addition to their regular taxes, Meagher County citizens opted to fund an additional three mils to provide a local budget for weed control. “You can drive through the county and see the pride the landowners have [in their weed management]. Our problem is minimal compared to the adjacent counties and western Montana. This is from hard work and dedication.”

According to Olson, the landowners dedicate themselves because they recognize the potential threat to their land value. They also understand that if an infested area is not treated properly and effectively, the management costs rise. Most areas can be treated once a year, but if a weed infestation is neglected, especially near roads or other high traffic areas, treatment must be applied numerous times.

For Olson, the Smith River corridor stands as a specific area of interest. He, along with SRHP, understands the potential implications for both the river and those who enjoy it. The river’s wild trout and breathtaking scenery have always made it a popular destination. And its renowned reputation resonates both on a regional and national scale. Last year, 4,578 people applied for one of the 900 permits required to float the Smith. But, as Olson indicates, the spread of noxious weeds can greatly affect the river’s recreational uses.

Only about 20 percent of the land in the Smith River corridor lies within the Lewis and Clark National Forest—the rest is private property. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) leases a handful of the designated boat camps from local landowners, therefore a healthy relationship is necessary. “Unfortunately, some landowners don’t

want any use from floaters because of the high risk of getting noxious weeds,” says Olson. “Seeds hide in rolled up tents and other gear and floaters transport them not only from campsite to campsite, but also from other areas. One of our biggest fears is that new invasive species will end up being introduced from other regions.”

For Olson, the solution lies in awareness and care. “The best tool is prevention,” he says. “We’re plum happy if people wash their vehicles and gear, but that’s not always the case.” He hopes the locals don’t pay too high a price.

One of the locals in Olson’s district is Howard Zehntner of White Sulphur Springs. A short man with a dark, gray beard and glasses, Zehntner owns 1,085 acres along Tenderfoot Creek in addition to his ranch three miles east of town. And like Ken McKamey, Zehntner has understood the importance of managing noxious weeds for a long time.

“We started on the leafy spurge when we bought the place in 1959,” Zehntner says. “The first year we were down there on our property on the Tenderfoot, a guy came by, an old farmer, and he said, ‘You know you got leafy spurge?’ We didn’t, and he told us we needed to get on it because it was worse than Canada thistle. He was right, that leafy spurge is tough stuff. It’ll just eat everything up and take your ground away.”

Zehntner allows people to access the Tenderfoot through his property as long as they sign in at the gated entrance. And his land sees a lot of recreational traffic. “Geez, there’s a lot of people that come into the creek,” he says, rubbing his eyes under his glasses. “About a thousand people come through every summer.” And with the traffic comes weeds. “People pack those seeds back and forth with their vehicles. That’s

what's caused all the problems. We find knapweed where the cars usually park. But 4-wheelers are the worst. Those darn 4-wheelers run all over."

But, in celebrating old Montana customs, Zehntner won't prohibit people from accessing the Tenderfoot through his property. He'd rather they simply recognize and appreciate the potential problem of noxious weeds. Regardless, he keeps up with his weed management, contracting most of the work out to Olson.

"You can keep it under control, but you have to stay with it," Zehntner says. Some people don't stay committed and they end up getting frustrated. The problem is you miss a year or two and your weeds are gonna come back. It'll cost you a little money, and it's a never ending fight, but it's definitely manageable and it's completely worth it."

Zehntner's brother, Glenn, shares the same belief. "I'm all for fighting weeds," Glenn says, raising his eyebrows and stroking his short, white beard. When Glenn used to frequent the Tenderfoot property, he would carry a Windex bottle of a "2, 4d" (the popular herbicide prior to Tordon). "I'd spray every plant I'd come across."

But the Zehntners' weed management extends beyond their property line. "When I went to pick up my grandson from football practice this fall," Glenn says, "I parked and looked over and saw a big old knapweed plant." He raises his eyebrows again. Then he smiles. "I went right over and pulled it."

Although they do their part, the Zehntners, like other landowners in the Smith River corridor, would benefit from a more educated public. In her consulting work, Celestine Duncan promotes awareness for noxious weeds at every turn. And while further education is always the goal, Duncan is quick to indicate that the public has

become more “weed-conscious” over the years. “There has been a huge change since I started in 1983,” she says. “Dr. Pete Fay, a former weed scientist at Montana State University, started the first awareness program in 1981 and deserves a lot of the credit. In 1984, they published and distributed the first weed calendar, which helped with species identification. If you compare the overall awareness then to what it is now, you realize how many people we have touched. But, of course, we still have a long way to go.”

Although most landowners concentrate on the economic implications, Duncan strives to illustrate the significant and necessary values of native plants and native ecosystems in Montana. And she believes Smith River floaters can appreciate this message. “There is a huge potential to educate on the Smith,” she says. “You have the opportunity to talk to people who are about to spend five days around leafy spurge and have the chance to see its presence and impact in a serene setting.”

SRHP strives to take advantage of this educational opportunity. Beyond acquiring grant money, SRHP actively fundraises to finance and develop awareness materials, as well as support ecological research within the corridor. Recently, private donations helped fund a new brochure outlining the basic facts and potential risks of invasive species along the Smith River. The brochure will be widely dispersed among potential floaters, local landowners, and the general public.

To further their effort, SRHP relies on its partnership with FWP. The state agency maintains all the boat camps along the Smith River and assists in the fight against noxious weeds. “We keep an active record of leafy spurge and other invasive species,” says Colin Mass, Smith River district park manager. “In addition to our own

observations, we ask floaters to report any potential noxious weed sightings during their trips.”

Last July, Mass joined the Forest Service for its annual “treatment float,” during which the group spent five days spraying contaminated areas. “We sprayed in July because there was less river traffic,” Mass says. The group keeps the spraying away from all boat camps and mixes a blue dye in with the herbicide so that the treated areas are apparent to recreational floaters. “Although we do it in a very controlled and safe manner, some people don’t like spraying,” Mass adds. “That’s why we alert the public before spraying. There is also a sign posted in the boat camps near the treated areas that inform people when we sprayed, what we sprayed and where we sprayed.”

As far as preventative measures, Mass’s rangers incorporate a “weed speech” into their pre-trip lecture to floaters. The speech focuses on weed awareness, including proper identification. Additionally, a kiosk at the Camp Baker put-in informs people of the concerns regarding noxious weeds and suggests means of management and prevention.

Also, FWP and SRHP hope to have Camp Baker equipped with a wash station in the future. Mass recently spoke with an aquatic nuisance specialist about the specifics regarding a designated area where vehicles, boats and gear can be easily sprayed with water to remove invasive seeds. “The goal is to have it this upcoming season,” says Mass.

Beyond the efforts of FWP and other organizations, SRHP knows the ultimate contribution rests in the hands of the general public. By increasing awareness, SRHP hopes to get even more people “on board” and active in weed control. Last summer, volunteers from Maelstrom Air Force Base in Great Falls floated down the Smith to pull

houndstongue in and around the boat camps. The effort resulted in a high percentage of weed-free camps—a vast improvement from the year before. SRHP strives to encourage similar participation and involvement throughout the Smith River corridor, as well as greater Montana.

But a united effort is needed. With such infectious species, a landowner's commitment to weed control can be negated if adjacent properties are left unmanaged. For this reason, the state occasionally imposes legal measures. "Weed districts can require landowners to have a weed plan," says Otto Olson. "Otherwise, you could be jeopardizing your neighbor."

A "united effort" is SRHP's ultimate goal. "[The organization] is great because they get neighbors to buy into the campaign against weeds," says Mass. But the potential for further cooperation always looms.

For Olson, the commitment to weed control boils down to basic principles. You can ignore the numerous risks and implications posed by invasive species if you wish. But in Montana, a state that prides itself on its strong sense of community, "jeopardizing your neighbor" does not sit well. Thus, the idea is simple:

"Weed prevention and control is the neighborly thing to do."