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The importance of public involvement in controlling leafy spurge

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Note: As a writer, I serve DowElanco, on noxious weed issues in particular. My company, Bader Rutter & Associates, is an ad agency in Milwaukee, Wis. I'm based here in Lincoln.

Let me explain how I ended up here before you. I attended a committee meeting. Now many of you are perhaps very familiar with committee meetings. You know the scene. Several people around a table draining three coffeepots. Someone says we ought to do such and such. A period of silence. These very busy people avoid eye contact. And then someone opens their mouth and begins to pontificate on the subject. That's called volunteering. So here I am.

Committees are funny things. Like Yogi Berra said: I'd like to thank the person who made this meeting necessary.

Actually, I'd like to thank the Symposium planning committee. It is truly an honor to speak to you.

So let's talk about the importance of public involvement in controlling leafy spurge, or managing leafy spurge, or living with it, or whatever term you prefer to use. For leafy spurge is noteworthy among noxious weeds for many reasons. It is the lightning rod of noxious weeds. Others may cause more economic harm. Others infest more acres. Others spread much faster. Others may destroy more land. But leafy spurge is perceived as the most harmful. It draws more interest from people, more attention of regulators, more time and animation from the research community and the energy of tax revenues. Perhaps this is so because leafy spurge is more feared than the other weeds, because it is so persistent. And such a threat.

But even the lightning rod of noxious weeds gets little attention outside our small circle. Overall public awareness is low... political support meager... and in the context of our country's many social problems, it is considered at best a minor concern.

But not to us. It is important to us. It's important to those we serve directly.

If this does not ring true for you, here are several examples.

Just a few years ago the Heritage Foundation cited funding for leafy spurge control on federal lands as a waste of money.

More recently, publicity from the Office of the President this year recommended cutting federal funds for a research project on leafy spurge. That project was to cost something like \$250,000. Compared to the annual expenses of our government, it is paltry. Yet there was spurge at the whipping post.

What does this mean in the day to day? I ran into a weed scientist at Chicago O'Hare Airport. We were acquaintances and we got to visiting about his job, and the neat things he was doing, groundbreaking stuff. Well, I said, What is your research budget? Turns out it was something like \$3,000. Hardly enough to pay for test tubes, let alone lab time, grad student research, field testing. And like many researchers, he obtained outside funding for a significant portion of his work.

There are many examples of how noxious weed research and control get short shrift. And it is my opinion that it will only get worse unless there are changes.

On the local and state level, our roads and bridges are coming apart. Fixing them costs big bucks. There are similar pressures on other services, such as education, health care, and other public works.

As Sid Salzman said in a hallway conversation just yesterday, he as mayor of Ainsworth, Nebraska, has had some difficulty explaining to his citizens why the city must spend \$2 million for a new water plant to meet new regulations. And then there's the landfills.

The point is each of these areas has a large constituency, larger than that for weed control, or some other driving regulatory requirement.

And it doesn't help that in many rural areas' populations are declining and many young people are moving out.

University budgets also are facing the budget crunch. I'm sure that you are dealing with this trend each day, for the same trends are at work in the government agencies.

In the larger scheme of things, the Los Angeles riots will pull more money into the rotting core of our major metro areas. And rural America will see fewer resources devoted to its special needs.

All these trends will compel a forced ranking of what is "perceived" as most important. And that is where the dollars will go.

We'll have to choose among essential services. I argue that in many cases, noxious weeds will not make the cut.

Continued financial pressure on agricultural operations, and in some cases landowner apathy, will simply accelerate the cycle of destruction.

But we know the core problem. Noxious weeds can destroy the land. A) they cut the flow of money from agriculture; or B) in the worst case, they take land from the tax base.

Society is the loser, forfeiting a portion of renewable wealth. ***We protect that... that is our service ... and that is our value.***

Now, before we close down the mainstreets and bring back the bison, before we hang it up, before we grow despondent because our society just is not going to recognize the value of agriculture in general nor our specialized services in particular, let me ask this question.

Do we have a marketing problem? Yes. We do.

In part, my answer to this builds upon the definition of services. Services as in the service economy. Services as in public service.

By definition, a service is not a service unless someone is being served. Anything else is sitting at a desk with a phone that doesn't ring.

What I mean is, someone must benefit from a specific set of activities or there is no service. That's because no value is being transferred from the person performing the service to the person being served.

Here's an instance of that. An insurance agent who has no customers writes policies for no one and is not performing any service. They are not likely to remain an insurance agent very long.

In a similar context, we help ensure the sustainability of agriculture in many regions. Who is our customer? And do they know we act on their behalf.

Clearly the producer is our customer and we are agents of change who enhance his or her operation. So when we show that noxious weed control is profitable, either through utilization or protection of land values, we perform direct service and transfer value. And they know we are there for them.

But in many cases, there is little or no direct payment for *the results of* our services. With the general public, they may benefit from our works without their knowledge.

For example, the public servant does a socially beneficial labor, draws a paycheck, has programs funded. Some benefit directly, but for the rest the value flows to them indirectly.

Here's how. Farmers save money when they apply new findings in crop research. The result: cheaper food for all of us. And it's something for which we all have paid. That's simple, you say.

Of course it is. But does the general public understand? Not very likely.

So I'd add another criterion. It is one that I think relevant to indirect values transferred in the service economy. It concerns this matter of ensuring that the benefits of our services remain sustainable.

I think that an indirect service is not valuable unless it is perceived by enough people to be important, beneficial, relevant, and valuable.

And that leads us to the importance of public involvement in noxious weed control.

The work we do is for the greater good. Yet I wonder if we get enough recognition to sustain our efforts.

Yes, it is very nice to get a pat on the back. But that's not what I mean. If what we do is critical to society, we need recognition to keep it going. So our ego needs are really

secondary to the larger problem of preserving agriculture. And I believe we are at a turning point not entirely of our own making. We can stem the spread of noxious weeds like leafy spurge through improved control on the farm, advancement of research, and strengthened regulation. Or we can lapse.

In Nebraska we have a rather unique group of folks who help ensure that this recognition occurs. That is the Nebraska Leafy Spurge Working Task Force, and the regional chapters spawned by the state organization.

These ranchers, farmers, researchers, regional, state and county officials, local residents, agribusiness representatives all actively advocate for better leafy spurge control and educate the public about noxious weeds. This grassroots organization has helped supply the political will to fuel a resurgent noxious weed effort.

They form a constituency for leafy spurge control, and can fulfill a political role when that is necessary in a society that indeed is political.

These folks have successfully lobbied for a strengthened state weed law.

They write letters to state and federal legislators to support increased funding for noxious weed control research.

They went to darn near every sales barn in the state with leafy spurge specimens to show producers what it looked like.

They have a weed mapping and tracking program.

They have stimulated interest in biological control and helped the various agencies put out insect releases.

They raised \$44,500 to pay for a weed physiologist position dedicated to leafy spurge at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln.

As individuals and a group they devoted countless hours to this cause. And there is not a single one of them who isn't quite busy in some other vocation. They have done many, many things. Tough, difficult, and challenging things.

Perhaps you have a group of folks in your region who perform a similar role. Perhaps you have an organized and inclusive group to whom you can provide direct service. For it is through their advocacy that a larger portion of society gains appreciation for your services. They can be the glue that holds the thing together, and sustains it. They give us depth, give us commitment and give us will.

There's a perfect example of this "people power" right across from our hotel. You all are familiar with Ross Perot and his withdrawal as an "alleged" presidential candidate just a few days ago. If you look outside you'll see a Ross Perot for President campaign office, signs in the windows, everything. And a great big "We're open" sign on the front door. The momentum carries this movement forward despite the loss of its leading light.

In much the same way, people power can support our efforts. They can also help us in directing our effort, so that what we do in research, regulation, or marketing has direct value to them.

In your region such a group may not be called the Leafy Spurge Task Force. It may go by some other name, but serve a similar role. In any case, we must recognize them, for they recognize us.

So let us take a moment to recognize three individuals key to the success of the Nebraska Leafy Spurge Task Force. By doing so, before a group such as yourselves, we increase the honor paid to them as individuals. And just as important, we honor what they represent. For that is why the Nebraska Leafy Spurge Task Force honors these three people today.

First, let's recognize Sid Salzman. Sid has ranched in Brown County, Nebraska, for over 40 years. He first observed leafy spurge on his land in 1951. He helped found the Task Force and was its first president, from 1987 to 1989. He has been president of the Society of Range Management's Nebraska section, and has been active in livestock associations. More recently, he was elected Mayor of Ainsworth, Nebraska. Sid has been a true soldier of spurge. He's devoted many hours and much thought and energy organizing political and control efforts. All without compensation. Because of Sid's leadership, knowledge and effort, the state leafy spurge effort has attained credibility and success.

Next let us recognize Dennis Jilg. Dennis couldn't be here today, for as some of you know he ranches in Rock County, Nebraska, near Newport. With all this rain, the ranchers are a little behind putting up hay, so that's what he's busy doing now. Dennis has been a member of the Task Force since 1987. He was the group's second president, serving from 1989 to 1991. With the help of Dennis's leadership, the task force won honorable mention in state and national Take Pride In America award programs. He also was instrumental in raising the \$44,500 for the plant physiologist position at the university. We hope this research will yield fruitful knowledge for the long-term struggle. These funds were raised in six months from area, state and local organizations and agencies, including Natural Resource Districts and county weed programs. Dennis continues to provide leadership on this as chairman of the task force research committee.

Lastly, and for me a very special award, let us recognize the efforts of a representative of the agribusiness community. It's special for me because I work closely with this person and regard him as a personal friend. And that is John Kitchell of DowElanco. John's leadership, organizational help, time and energy have helped foster the Task Force. John has also been in a position to provide a great deal of information, through posters, photos, videos, and literature. DowElanco each year has supported the Task Force's annual meeting and weed tour. And all these things have helped the Task Force reach the farming community and the general public efficiently and effectively.

So let us recognize these people, with the understanding that what they do is valuable to us, and to the society we all serve.

Thank you.