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The spurge program in Stillwater County, MT

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One of the things I should mention, we limited our weed bounty program to ages from 10 to 18 years. I'm not real sure that was a wise move. Last year we had some mothers come in with little kids who couldn't even write and signed up for this program. And we had some of the most excited mothers running around that county. Then on the other end of the spectrum, this year, just here last week I had an older lady stop me and said will you bring me one of those spotted knapweed plants that everybody's talking about. I'd like to know what they look like. I said sure, I'll bring one in so you can see what all the fuss is about around here. And as I started on down the street, she hollered at me and said but don't bring one that's got any seeds on it. And she was 80 years old. Maybe we should get the older people to help fight weeds also. I think that's great. You can't limit it to just one bunch of people. When you get into a weed awareness program, you've got to have everybody in the whole county or the whole state involved in this thing, if you're going to make it work.

One other quick comment on our program for this year. Last year we had 34 claims filed, and that pretty well covered every spotted knapweed patch that we had. This year, we have had less than 20 claims so far. We were going to cut the program off July 1. We didn't have our budget used up and there are other patches showing up out there along roads, so we extended it on and it's still open. We often have kids come up to me and say do you know where I can find a knapweed to turn in? They can't find them now and that's the same bunch of kids that were real eager hunters last year. So we have accomplished something. We don't have as many spots to be recorded this year as we had last year. I think it's great.

What I'm supposed to be talking about today is what we are doing in the leafy spurge arena. To start with, I'm the first and only supervisor for Stillwater County, so we kind of started at square one trying to figure out what we wanted to do. I started 11 years ago. During that time, I've probably met with all the frustrations of any weed supervisor lack of funds, equipment, environmental concerns, and all the things that everybody is concerned with. And during that time, we've probably tried just about everything in the book and quite a few things that are not in the book and probably never will be. We read everything we could find that Wyoming was doing and Harold Alley and George Hill and all the pros down there kind of setting the pace for some things. We copied a lot of their things and kept moving along. I can truthfully say that after 11 years of actively fighting leafy spurge, we don't have a lot more spurge now than we had when I started. We really haven't gained on it, but we've sure controlled a lot of spurge. It doesn't sound like

we've been doing much when I make that statement, but we've killed hundreds of acres of new patches of leafy spurge. We haven't killed a single patch that was here to start with. They're still there and I suspect they're going to be there for a long time. We kill the tops, but we never get the root system. We catch new spots and kill them because they haven't got a root system down yet that you have to fight with. You can control the spread. So, that's kind of what we're looking at is more of a stop the spread type of thing rather than really trying to control or kill that old spurge. Back 11 years ago when we started, we started with the Tordon program and we found out that sure enough if you put out 2 lbs. of Tordon per acre, the next year you'd have very little spurge and lots of grass. Well, this looked great, and this went on a couple years. So that we'd started our public awareness hitting the local press and really pushing the issue and the ranchers would come and look at our test plots and all the things we were doing and we determined that was the way to go. We figured that applying 2 lbs. of Tordon on the leafy spurge and you would have the problem solved. We decided we were going to get every acre of spurge in Stillwater County and soon as we got that done, we'd be in good shape.

About this time, because of the awareness thing, we had a lot of people calling up. And they'd say isn't there a weed law? Can't I force my neighbor, or will you will force my neighbor to clean up his leafy spurge? Then I can start working on mine. Well, probably he had as much as the neighbor, but he felt if we made the neighbor clean up first why then his would be a little easier or something. That's been a problem for quite a while. We did address that in our new weed law that goes into effect in October.

We decided we were going to develop some kind of program to get on this weed thing. So the first move we made was to contact the state, they had a program going about then where we could get a plane in there with the infrared cameras and fly the area. We did that and it turned out real well. With that infrared you can pretty well pick out the spurge if you have a professional interpret them for you. We had our area mapped in short order where those spurge areas were. Then we called a meeting out in the spurge country of the ranchers and we hung these maps up, these big infrared pictures on the wall and everything looked real impressive. So we had the meeting, discussed the problem, and you know every rancher in that area that we contacted that has leafy spurge showed up at that meeting, except one and he sent his hired man cause he couldn't make it. So that shows the interest that the people have in weed control if they had an opportunity to do something.

As a result of that meeting, 13 of those ranchers decided to get a helicopter in and apply Tordon pellets on the area and really clean things up. The 13 ranchers we got together called in a helicopter and we put this program together and it was quite successful. Next year we did the same thing. And boy we really got things going now. But then things kind of started to happen, the helicopter pilot crashed and was killed, and that kind of stopped that a little bit. Then we started looking at the things that we'd been doing three or four years before, and evaluating them, and here was the spurge coming back just as big as it ever was. Well, right away the ranchers started backing off, saying well we can't afford it, this \$114, which was the average cost of that program per acre. We can't afford that every year on this rangeland. Well obviously they couldn't, because we didn't really realize that it was going to come back.

So that kind of changed the whole picture then. We had to reevaluate, decided which way we were going to go on this thing. They were still willing to do something. They still wanted to fight it. So then we went into a program, a prevention type program, where we were only going to work those areas around the basic infestations that had been their 50-60 years and keep it from spreading. And that worked great. We did that for a year. And we got good results. We're killing spurge. But by the second and third year after that program, why we started deciding that was pretty futile effort with all this seed source we had down through there and we had quite a few acres of really prime spurge. As long as that seed was there, and we had deer and birds and everything spreading that seed, we were going to have quite a problem just trying to keep ahead of it, just trying to keep it from spreading.

But the interesting thing, right when all of this was going on, we had one rancher setting right in the middle of the worst of it, wondering what all the fuss was about. He was an old-timer and he just couldn't buy our programs. But he was running sheep and there wasn't a spurge on his ranch. From the infrared, you could pick up his ranch, and you could walk over and look at it and there wasn't a yellow spurge on it, but it was loaded with spurge, it was there, but it wasn't blooming. Well, occasionally you had a few blooms but never went to seed on that ranch. In fact he was complaining that at the time his lambs weren't as heavy now as when he had more spurge. We started thinking about this thing so we started trying to convert a few cowboys into shearers, and if you every tried that, that's tough. But gradually, they started calculating the cost of \$100-acre Tordon and looking what that guy was going over there making a nice profit, and not spending money on chemicals. He spent a little, in areas the sheep couldn't get to. He used it to clean up. He wasn't opposed to it. But they started looking at his program and so one by one they started falling into line. And every year since then we've added one or two ranchers. This year I added two that picked up some sheep. Next year I've got one already committed that's going to go with sheep. We've got one small tract owner started this year. He fenced his 10-acre tract, but with all the spurge down there, he thought it was kind of pretty, but everybody else was complaining about it, so he fenced that and put a few sheep in there. I was by there last week and the grass is taller than the sheep in there and the spurge is taller than the sheep, but there isn't a yellow blossom in that whole patch, they've got it. And that's really what it's all about. We get comments, you know, saying sheep don't kill spurge; you're just wasting your time. But neither does Tordon in those old patches. And when you look at it, those guys are making a few bucks with sheep and the guys who are spreading are spending \$100 an acre. So you know, it's hard to justify that economically to these ranchers that are in hard times. Now this year, of all the years, the guys that are really surviving up there pretty well are the guys with sheep and leafy spurge. That old spurge is down 20 feet and growing well and it's cheaper. They're eating it like crazy and getting fat. His neighbor with nice clean rangeland that he's kept cleaned up all these years with cows and grass, the grass is dried up and gone, and his cows are headed for the market. You know, maybe we should be looking at this leafy spurge in a little different light and making use it, since we can't control it anyhow. Well, I shouldn't say we can't control it, we can control it. We can't kill it. But, maybe we should be changing our program to fit their problem. Rather than trying to change that problem, especially in economically hard times like Jim Welsh was just telling us about. The research that Pete Fay has done has proven that sheep will do well on

leafy spurge. The lambs that weaned off the leafy spurge 5 to 15 lbs. heavier than they do on straight grass, and I understand we are going to have a speech later on today on sheep, so I better not get into that. But you know maybe we're approaching this thing the wrong way. Now I'm not saying go out and plant leafy spurge, but I do think these areas that we have a big problem with that we can't kill in established areas, we can keep them from becoming a problem by keeping that seed off from it, while we're spraying the edges and keeping that cleaned up and preventing the thing from getting out of hand until we get a better method of control.

Now that's our program in Stillwater County right now, trying to just contain the thing and keep it from spreading. We have probably more acres of spurge right now than we had when I started just because it's grown along the Yellowstone and the Rosebud and Fishtail creeks and all the different rivers and streams here in the county, in areas that we can't spray. It's in the brush and thickets and things that are difficult to control and we have that certain breed of problem with that spreading. The old areas are still there like I say, although they're not seeding. The ranchers aren't being infringed on areas and encroaching on them anymore because we stopping the new stuff.

So we're kind of in a containment situation at this point. We're now looking at islands and the fishing accesses. We have a program going today in fishing accesses, with goats. We take a trailer load of goats out and dump them in a fishing access. We tie them to a tree somewhere in the middle of a leafy spurge patches and turn the rest loose. The other goats graze around that area and stay close to the ones that are tied. The horse trailer we leave it there in the access with a little wire pen right behind it, an enclosure, a few panels that we shut them up at night so that they don't have to be watched. In the daytime, the Fish and Game crews are taking care of them right now. When they're in an access area doing some work they just turn the goats out and put them in at night. And when they move to a new area, we move our goats. We made a video tape just last week on the thing that's quite interesting, showing what they can do and the Fish, Wildlife and Parks is actually using that as a selling tool. We have them in the video and we're working with them closely on it, and hopefully that will become a state program. And if it does, we'll be hiring a full-time or several full-time goat herders that will just comb the fishing accesses... I know it sounds funny, but we do crazy things in Stillwater County. But it's working. And the video tape that we took just for a demonstration purposes, I guess, we turned a few goats out one at a time and put the camera right on them to see where they would go when we turned them out of the pen. Four goats, one at a time, went out and the first thing they did was grab leafy spurge and vigorously ate it, they just didn't nibble it. They were pulling that stuff and really going after it. About 15 minutes later we came back and took some pictures of what they were grazing, and by then they were taking a bite of spurge and a bit of old wild rose bushes or a weed or brush or anything in there. They're eating very little grass. A goat doesn't like grass particularly when they have brush to pick on. This impresses the Fish and Game folks because they had more choppers in there trying to thin the brush in their accesses anyhow. So I think we're going to make that work as a tool for cleaning up those areas that are a problem, that we can't get into it with chemicals, can't mow, and can't chop because of the nature of the place. We've had about 12-15 goats on an island there at Columbus for 2 years. We leave them there year around. There's 42 acres on that island just totally covered with spurge, and there hasn't been a blossom on that island in 2 years. So, you know, it's real effec-

tive. They go into the brush and it's not overgrazed. The grass is still better than it was because they won't eat much grass. But they'll go into the brush where it's the thickest where a sheep won't go.

That's probably enough of what we're doing there. We're into biological as Norm Rees told you yesterday. We had four releases in our county of insects that we're working on. I think that is a tool of the future. Norm would be the first to tell you that success is down the road a ways, so we can't depend on that cleaning up the leafy spurge just overnight. But we need that and we need everything we can think of. The biggest thing that you can do right now is to get all the people working with you just like we were talking about with the ransom program. Get people aware of your problem and through the local press and through the media and whatever, any kind of a program that you can get people involved. The county weed crew can't possibly take care of the weed problem in any county I've ever seen. It's just too big of deal usually for a weed control program with the county. But if you can enlist the help of all the landowners and get them a bit excited about the thing and aware of the problem, it'll work. Now you can't go out there and twist their arms, say we're going to force weed laws on you. You can make all the laws you want, and it's not going to work. I told our people down there when they were trying to get me to force that weed law. That I just was not the type of person play The Enforcer and go out and threaten folks. Because I just don't like to be threatened. I'm a rancher, and I don't want somebody telling me how do to things, even if they're right. You know that attitude. But you can lead people into programs and make them develop their own programs, help them develop their programs and make them want to do these things. We have got a program in Stillwater County, it's working great and I've never tried to force anybody to take care of weeds out there. From the peer pressure from the neighbors and just one guy succeeding and everybody else follows along, and it's working real well. We've got a long ways to go, we're not the perfect county by any means, but we do have some pretty good things going.