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## **A brief overview of Fremont County Weed and Pest Control District**

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Fremont County is the second largest county in Wyoming covering a little over 6 million acres in the Wind River Drainage. The altitude runs from 4,800 to 13,000 feet. Precipitation averages 14"/year with half of the county receiving less than 10". Fremont County is home to about 40,000 people. There are two major towns, Riverton and Lander, the county seat. Over half of the land is owned by the United States, 3,105,106 acres. The Wind River Indian Reservation takes another 1,889,505 acres. State and local governments own 409,554 acres, and 743,682 acres are privately owned. There are 877 farms and ranches, 762 of which are irrigated to some degree. There are four major irrigation projects and hundreds of private ditches which water 185,000 acres of crop land. When you add water to the desert you raise crops and lots of weeds. Easily 250,000 acres of the county is economically infested with one or more species which include Canada thistle, Russian knapweed, hoary cress, leafy spurge, musk thistle, perennial pepperweed, Dalmatian toadflax, spotted knapweed, and diffuse knapweed.

Weeds have always been important to Wyoming and since 1904 there has been some kind of related legislation about every four years. The first weed law was passed in 1936 and authorized weed districts to "seize all infested lands". A weed district was formed in Fremont County in 1937. By 1939 there were four weed districts in the county, each associated with an irrigation project. World War II ended formal weed control activity for several years. After the war, weed control activity was poorly organized, and the lack of activity allowed many weeds to really get going. In 1948 the program was revitalized by combining all the districts into one. Minutes from meetings at that time show purchases of the first weed sprayer in the county, freight car loads of polyborchlorate and wages paid to men who traveled from farm to farm cultivating weed patches. Our present law was passed in 1972. It was less punitive and more extensive in nature with a positive reliance on technology. Every county in the state had a district formed on county boundaries which was autonomous. The State Department of Agriculture has a coordinating role, but district weed boards, appointed by the county commissioners, run the show. Districts are financed with a 1 mill levy on all real property in the county. This funding is separate from the county 12 mill tax so the district is rather independent.

In 1997, Fremont County had an assessed valuation of 260 million. Our mill was set at 1.9 to raise about \$490,000. We generate another \$250,000 through spray operations. With our cash reserves the total budget exceeds 1.1 million dollars. We spend about \$330,000 to \$350,000 annually on leafy spurge. We annually cost share \$250,000 with land owners on other weeds as well. We do not retail chemical except through our equipment. We cost share through the local ag chem dealers who deduct the cost share at the point of sale and bill the district at the end of the month. We cost share on products that are proven to be effective for the control of designated noxious weeds, i.e. Tordon and Roundup @ \$25/gal, Banvel @ \$20/gal, Stinger/Transline @ \$96/gal, and Escort/Telar @ \$8/gal.

The district is staffed with one supervisor, two assistant supervisors, a secretary/bookkeeper, GIS/Computer operator, a mechanic, two full time hands, and 16 to 20 seasonal spray hands. The annual payroll is about \$325,000. Our main office is in the County Court House in Lander. There is a shop in Riverton and chemical storage buildings in both towns. We have seasonal facilities in the Dubois/Crowheart area.

We focus on using tax dollars to treat weeds on public rights of way. The Wyoming Department of Transportation contracts with the district for vegetation management on 500 centerline miles of state highways where we treat delineators and guard rails for annual broadleaf weeds and designated noxious weeds. We contract with the Bureau of Indian Affairs to control weeds on 350 miles of tribal roads and 450 miles of irrigation canals. We treat weeds on 3,000 miles of county maintained roads. We handle vegetation management tasks for Midvale Irrigation District, which operates the largest canal system in the county with 500 miles of delivery system, 400 miles of drains, and thousands of acres of non-irrigated rangeland inside of the original irrigation take. As part of our operation we help the county maintain maps on a computer based GIS system for land ownership, weed inventory, roads, surface water and soil types, applicator records, topography, and rural addressing. We are now able to provide our customers with detailed maps of their property showing weeds, treatment activity, topography, and property boundaries. To cover all this ground we operate 17 vehicles, two with computer controlled injector spraying systems. We have 9 loaner spray rigs for owners of smaller acreages.

Biologically based weed control is a growing segment of our program. We have released 25 different species of biological control agents on 8 different weed species. Our largest effort is in leafy spurge where 7 species are released. Data is collected at many sites annually to monitor progress. About half of my time is spent on biocontrol and during the summer I hire a technician to move bugs and collect data. Altogether the district spends about \$50,000 annually on biological control of weeds and pests. Our first releases were on musk thistle which has been severely impacted to the degree that it does not pose an economic impediment to the use of the land. It is not really a weed any more. Since 1978 Fremont County Weed and Pest has made over 2,000 insect releases on leafy spurge. We maintain data on 325 sites and have exported over 400,000 insects to other counties and states. This is not a research program primarily, although some research does come out of the work. We noticed that leafy spurge was spreading faster than the insects at many sites. So we have worked hard to make saturation releases to insure that insects were within a quarter of a mile of all known spurge. In ten years they will spread

to all the spurge on their own. A hundred years from now it probably won't matter, but it will in twenty. The goal is not to watch as the insects spread across the landscape and report on their activities. We want to kill some spurge.

In 1978 the legislature passed the Leafy Spurge Act. It authorized districts with leafy spurge to go to two mils. It established an 80% cost share on leafy spurge control costs and provided funding for some of the poorer counties that had a lot of leafy spurge. The plan was based on the ideas that one treatment with picloram followed for two years with an annual treatment of 2,4-D would reduce the spurge to the point that land owners could then maintain control economically. Leafy spurge is tougher than that kind of chemical based approach. We were using 1,500 pounds of picloram every year. There was no incentive to do any thing else with the 80% cost share. In a few years there were 36 wells and several streams contaminated with Tordon. In 1992, the legislature broadened the approach with the Special Weed Management Act, a replacement for the sunsetting Leafy Spurge Act. It allowed cost share on integrated programs with a heavy emphasis on biological control methods.

One of my assistants is in charge of weed free hay certification. He inspects 3,000 acres of hay and 400 acres of small grains. We certify about 10,000 tons every summer, less than half of which is sold as certified hay. It is a good tool to teach growers about weed control and get them to do a better job at controlling weeds. We charge labor after the first two hours in the field to try to discourage those who want to certify everything on the place even though they will feed most of the hay themselves. Some people just like to gold star and to be able to brag a little.

Fremont County Weed and Pest believes in personal service. We try to provide that every day of the year, all day long, face to face, and one on one. You have to teach weed control when the grower is willing to listen. It is on his schedule. We try to reduce bureaucracy in our programs, eliminate the red tape, and try to make something happen.