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**Federal weed spraying debated**

*Agency aims to triple coverage to slow fires; critics cite health threat*

**By Patrick O'Driscoll**

DENVER — The federal government's largest land agency is proposing to triple the number of acres it sprays each year to kill weeds in the West.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) wants to treat nearly 932,000 acres — about the same area as Yosemite and Rocky Mountain national parks combined. The annual spraying would be in parts of 17 states from Alaska to Texas.

The aim is to eliminate weeds like cheatgrass that can fuel catastrophic wildfires such as those that ravaged parts of Texas and Oklahoma this winter.

Noxious weeds and other invasive plants are now the dominant vegetation on an estimated 35 million acres of the bureau's terrain. Vast tracts of sagebrush have been crowded out by non-native plants and destroyed by fires worsened by cheatgrass.

Objecting to the plan are many farmers, organic-food consumers and anti-pesticide groups who say other controls are less toxic to people, wildlife and native plants.

“Our biggest issue is that what they're planning won't work,” says Caroline Cox, staff scientist for the Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides in Eugene, Ore. “Just spraying herbicides may be good at killing plants, but ... what you do is create empty spaces, which are perfect for more weeds.”

Public comment on the plan ends today. The bureau extended the time period a month because of high interest. The agency could make a final decision by summer.

“It's boiling down to petition wars now,” says weed project manager Brian Amme of the bureau's office in Reno. He says comments from groups opposed to the spraying have poured in, including a petition with 16,710 names that “tied up our fax machine for four hours.”

That group, the Organic Consumer Association, contends that chemicals can drift farther than planned “and cause unexpected health and ecological impacts” on wildlife and native plants. The sprays could also be a threat to tourists and to native tribes who gather plants on public land for food and cultural uses.

The bureau would use different methods on another 5 million acres to get rid of weeds and non-native plants. These include prescribed burning, mechanical removal such as pulling and tilling, and insects that feed on unwanted plant species.

“You use the common-sense tool for the area that you're in,” Amme says. Much of the spraying would occur in remote areas far from cities and towns. Herbicides would be applied far less frequently than in agricultural areas, where fields are sprayed several times a year. “In a normal situation, it is fairly benign,” Amme adds.

That wasn't the case for more than 100 farmers in south-central Idaho in 2000. A helicopter sprayed the weed killer Oust on thousands of acres that had burned in a brushfire. The aim was to stop cheatgrass from sprouting. But wind blew the herbicide onto nearby farms. Growers lost millions of dollars and are now suing.

Critics such as the Northwest Coalition say the bureau should focus on preventing weeds and restoring native plants. Amme says prevention is part of “how we do business every day.”

