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For Immediate Release

Invasive Species that are Harboring Endangered Species

What comes to mind when you hear “invasive species in Texas”? Do you think about feral hogs? Zebra mussels? Or maybe even Africanized bees? It’s not very often our minds jump to the thought of plants, trees and shrubs as invasive species. But here in West Texas it is especially true that some of our land is being taken over by noxious brush such as mesquite, saltcedars and prickly pear.

It is important in many areas to control invasive brush so that grass and native plants and trees can thrive. It is crucial for both livestock grazing and wildlife habitat. Clearing this water guzzling brush also helps to increase spring flow, water yield, and to enhance groundwater recharge. Studies of brush control show that mesquite, cactus and cedar species may be using, or wasting, as much as 10 million acre-feet of water in Texas each year.

While some brush can be cleared by heavy machinery, herbicides, or controlled burns, this is not true for saltcedars. Herbicides do not generally work, it takes much effort and money to pull it, and if you burn it- it grows back. This has led to salt cedar (or Tamarisk by its scientific name) being viewed as a monster by many in the Southwest.

Originating from Asia, Tamarisk was introduced as an ornamental and windbreak to the US in the 1800s. The federal government approved the establishment of saltcedars as a way to help control erosion. Once the plant began to establish itself along stream banks, attitudes soon began to change. It is now listed as an invasive plant by the US Department of Agriculture. According to a Nature Conservancy website, tamarisk “suck large amounts of water from the ground, transforming valuable desert streams and ponds into salty dry basins” and is referred to as one of “the worst weeds”.

Fortunately, by 2001 the US Department of Agriculture came up with a way to control saltcedars that is feasible, inexpensive and self-sustaining. They were able to launch a tamarisk beetle (or saltcedar leaf beetle) program. These beetles target only saltcedar species and destroy the plant by the larvae feeding on the top layer of tamarisk leaves. They go through three or four generations each year and it takes the plant being defoliated multiple times before it begins to deteriorate. In many cases it could take up

to three or four years, being defoliated up to four or five times per year, before the beetles can do enough damage to wipe out the plant. However, once the beetles take root it has shown to be very effective.

Unfortunately, in 2010 the US Department of Agriculture ended the program due to ecologists worrying that the beetles would destroy the tamarisk which has come to be the tree that the endangered Willow Flycatcher relies on for nesting. However, Texas doesn't have to worry much about the Southwestern Flycatcher like other states, such as New Mexico and Arizona, since these birds most likely just migrate through our state at the top of the panhandle. Therefore, we can continue to hope that these handy little insects will continue to thrive and spread throughout our state devouring this water guzzling brush. Every bit that is eliminated helps to conserve our streams, aquifers and watersheds.

For more information regarding brush control, the Permian Basin Underground Water Conservation District invites you to visit their website at www.pbuwcd.com or call them at 432-756-2136.