

Protect Colorado From Invasive Species

What is an invasive species?

Invasive alien species affect all regions of the United States. These species have been accidentally or intentionally introduced into an environment from which they did not evolve. Because they have no natural enemies to limit their reproduction, they usually spread rampantly. Invasive alien species are recognized as one of the leading threats to biodiversity and impose enormous costs to agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and other human enterprises, as well as to human health.



- The cost to control invasive species and the damages they inflict upon property and natural resources in the U.S. is estimated at **\$137 billion annually**.

What invasive species are present in Colorado?

Weeds

Colorado has designated 85 noxious weed species including: cheatgrass, jointed goatgrass, leafy spurge, purple loosestrife, Dalmatian toadflax and tamarisk. These invasive species harm Colorado's agriculture, environment and public health. Some of these impacts are:

Agricultural Effects

In 1989, just three species of noxious weeds (jointed goatgrass, volunteer rye and cheatgrass) were responsible for the loss of \$24 million to Colorado's wheat producers and an additional \$36 million to rural, wheat-producing communities. Every year, undetermined numbers of horses are lost due to the debilitating and irreversible brain damage caused by Russian knapweed, the third most common species of noxious weed in Colorado. Cheatgrass is unpalatable to sheep and other livestock; therefore as it becomes established this weed leads to overgrazing of native plants and reduces the overall grazing capacity of a piece of land.

Environmental Effects

Noxious weeds have displaced at least 10% of Colorado's native plant species and severely degraded important habitats of more than 85% of Colorado's wildlife species. Rare native plants such as the Orange Mountain dandelion and Ute ladies'-tresses are under constant threat of extirpation by more aggressive, generalist species such as musk and Canada thistles. The invasion of tamarisk has caused a serious decline in the Colorado's native riparian cottonwood and willow communities, which provide breeding grounds for several species of birds.

Public Health

Several Colorado children are hospitalized every year due to severe allergic reactions to the sap of myrtle spurge, an ornamental invasive species.

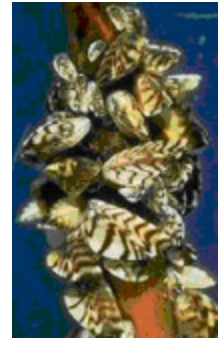
Recreation

The encroachment of tamarisk, or salt-cedar, has degraded sandy beaches along the Colorado River that are popular for recreational activities. Dense, thorny biennial thistles now impede access to fishing holes along many Colorado rivers including the upper South Platte and Roaring Fork.



Aquatic Invaders

Zebra mussels, which are already present in nearby Oklahoma, are threatening to invade Colorado as well. People are responsible for the spread of zebra mussels, which are transported when attached to the surfaces of boats. Even microscopic life stages of the mussel can be transported in the bilge, engine, live well, or trailer of a boat. Since their introduction to the Great Lakes in 1986 from ships' ballast water, zebra mussels have quickly spread and are now found in at least twenty states and two Canadian Provinces. The impacts of zebra mussels cost taxpayers an estimated **\$30 million** annually.



Coloradoans Can Learn From Others

Coloradoans stand today where other states found themselves 10 to 15 years ago in terms of noxious weed infestations. Many other states have excellent weed management programs today, but they lost millions of productive acres to noxious weeds because they waited. Coloradoans can save thousands of acres and dollars by managing infestations now before noxious weeds become more widespread. Of the 3,000 native species of plants in Colorado, 500 (17%) have already been displaced by non-native weed vegetation.

How do invasive species get here and how do we stop new arrivals?

Invasive species are introduced and spread through a variety of pathways including: the discharge of ballast water, transfer from recreational boaters, or they may spread naturally from previously infested areas. Terrestrial invasives also have a number of intentional and unintentional manners of introduction including trade, landscaping and the exotic pet industry. One of the best hopes for stopping the spread of invasive species both locally and nationally is the passage key legislation. The **National Aquatic Invasive Species Act** (NAISA), introduced by Rep. Gilchrest (H.R. 1591/1592) and Senators Levin and Collins (S. 770), would create a nationwide mandatory ballast water management program to prevent new invasive species from infesting US waters, provide for public education and outreach, and include provisions for rapid response.

Please ask your Senators and Representative to cosponsor the National Aquatic Invasive Species Act (S. 770 and H.R. 1591/1592) so we can preserve Colorado's natural heritage and important regional economies.

References

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