



Spanish Peaks-Purgatoire River
Conservation District



Purgatoire Watershed
WEED MANAGEMENT
COLLABORATIVE

2021 National Invasive Species Awareness Week (<https://www.nisaw.org/>)

Article #2 in a series of articles emphasizing awareness of noxious weeds and proven management practices

Priority Weeds of Las Animas County

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Noxious Weed Program of the Spanish Peaks-Purgatoire River Conservation District

Legal Designation of Noxious Weeds

Noxious weeds are legally designated by the Colorado Department of Agriculture (CDA), and the official list can be found here - <https://ag.colorado.gov/conservation/noxious-weeds/species-id>. Local governments (counties and municipalities) can make more strict (but not less strict) rulings than the State, if they would like greater focus on a certain species. Colorado's noxious weeds are prioritized into three different regulated Lists: A, B, C, along with one non-regulated, Watch List.

- List A species – Legally designated in the Colorado Noxious Weed Act for elimination on all lands, across all jurisdictions.
- List B species – Continued spread should be contained and stopped; local jurisdictions work with the State to determine reasonable level(s) of management.
- List C species – Widespread in many areas of the state. Localized, targeted control efforts can be beneficial, but regulated management is up to local entities. Listing prevents distribution through nursery stock and seed mixes.
- Watch List – Species that have been found to be problematic in neighboring states or states with similar environments, but do not yet have enough information in Colorado for formal listing. May or may not occur currently in the State, so distribution and behavior patterns should be reported to the CDA.

There are dozens of noxious weed species in Las Animas County. A Guide to Noxious Weeds of Las Animas County, complete with full color photos and integrated pest management recommendations for each species can be viewed or downloaded for free at <https://www.purgatoireconservation.org/las-animas-county-weed-guide.html>.

All noxious weeds are all problematic to some degree, but this article will focus on several high priority species; meaning their infestations have potential to cause extensive economic and ecological harm to communities and landscapes within the watershed.

List A Species in Las Animas County (LAC)

Currently, there are only two known List A species in LAC – African rue and Myrtle spurge.

African rue infestations are generally located in the Model and Tyrone areas of LAC – These are the only known infestations in the State of Colorado. It is a long-lived perennial plant and its preferred habitat is semi-arid prairie. It has been known to exist for approximately 50 years in LAC, but control efforts did not begin until the early 2000's when CSU Extension and LAC teamed up with local landowners, CDA and CSU to conduct control research. In 2016, PWWMC took on leadership of control efforts, continuing to work with LAC and CDA. At this time, infestations are believed to be contained and are slowly decreasing across the affected landscape.

African rue is highly impactful. All parts of the plant are toxic to people, livestock, and grazing/browsing wildlife. As it spreads, it excretes chemicals into the soil, suppressing native plants. This plant has no known economic or ecological value. Stopping its spread, eliminating existing populations, and implementing revegetation practices will ultimately restore economic and ecological value to the affected landscape.



African rue plants in the Model area outcompeting native vegetation.

Myrtle spurge is currently only known to exist in a handful of residential gardens within the City of Trinidad. This plant is toxic and should be handled with care. An *Early Detection and Rapid Response* plan is currently underway to eliminate this small population and to conduct annual monitoring to ensure this plant has not spread to other locations within the County.

List B Species of High Concern in LAC

Russian knapweed is undoubtedly the most populous noxious weed in LAC, infesting well over 2,000 acres. It is also one of the most troubling. It spreads rapidly by its root system, creating dense, monotypic stands. As with many noxious weeds it promotes itself through the excretion of chemicals into the soil that kill and suppress native plants, allowing it to spread at an alarming rate. It is toxic to horses and is of very poor forage quality to other livestock or grazing/browsing animals. It devastates biological diversity: As Russian knapweed reduces the diversity of native plants, it directly affects the diverse wildlife populations that depend upon native plant populations for habitat needs. It also infests many irrigated and non-irrigated agricultural fields in LAC, severely reducing crop production and land value. Mowing, tilling or disking actually promotes root growth, exponentially spreading it. A one inch fragment of root, buried 6 inches in the soil will sprout into new plants. Russian knapweed control requires extensive knowledge and skilled application of proper management techniques.

Scotch thistle dominates much of the landscape in the Aguilar/Gulnare areas, infesting hundreds of acres. It is easy to control if populations are treated early in an infestation. This plant is a biennial, which means it takes two years to complete its lifecycle and then it dies. It will set seed in its second year of growth and can produce up to 14,000 seeds per plant, thus it quickly establishes and spreads if no control measures are taken. Seed viability is roughly 35-40 years. Scotch thistle is of little to no economic or ecological value, and if left unchecked, will render land utterly useless due to its extremely dense and thorny growth. Preventing seed production is essential; applying control methods after the plant flowers and goes to seed is a waste of time and money.



Scotch thistle has become very dominant in the Trujillo Creek area.

What is Being Done about Noxious Weeds in LAC?

The Spanish Peaks-Purgatoire River Conservation District (SPPRCD), through its Purgatoire Watershed Weed Management Collaborative noxious weed program, has been tackling noxious weed issues head-on since 2016. With close to 80 landowners enrolled in PWWMC cost-share programs, over 3,000 acres of landscapes affected by noxious weeds have been managed since 2016. Las Animas County, Branson-Trinchera Conservation District and the Purgatoire Watershed Partnership are instrumental partners, helping to move the needle on restoring landscapes within LAC and the larger watershed.

Where Can You Get Help?

The PWWMC Coordinator or the SPPRCD Noxious Weed Technician can provide landowners with professional technical assistance for the identification and management of noxious weeds or other weedy plant species, land restoration practices, and information regarding PWWMC/SPPRCD noxious weed cost share programs:

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Helpful Information about Noxious Weeds -

- Local Information – www.purgatoireconservation.org (click on the “Noxious Weed” tab)
- Las Animas County Noxious Weed Guide - <https://www.purgatoireconservation.org/las-animas-county-weed-guide.html>
- CO Weed Management Association - <https://cwma.org/noxious-weed-awareness-campaign/>