

Farmer named 'Weed Warrior' for welted thistle fight

Jim McCormack has infestation on Alder Slope farm

By BILL BRADSHAW
Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — Enterprise-area farmer Jim McCormack is being recognized by the Wallowa County Weed Board as the Noxious Weed Warrior for 2021 for his efforts to stamp out welted thistle on his Alder Slope land and alert the county to other infestations, Weed Department Manager Andy Marcum said Wednesday, Dec. 29.

"It's one of two sites in all of North America," Marcum said. "It could be extremely invasive if it wasn't for landowners like Jim who are keeping an eye on it and calling us when they see it on their neighbors' land and we're able to keep it contained. Ever since it was found in 2016, we haven't found it anywhere else other than the original site."

County Commissioner Todd Nash, who also is a rancher and keeps a close eye on the county's agricultural resources, was the one who discovered the member of the Carduus family of thistles.

"I drove past it and then I stopped on Alder Slope in a county right-of-way alongside the road," Nash said Dec. 30. "I took a picture of it and sent the picture to Mark Porter and he spent some time identifying it and found out that it was, indeed, welted thistle. The closest plant was in North Dakota or southern Canada."

Porter, who is based in Enterprise, is the regional noxious weed specialist for the Oregon Department of Agriculture.

Nash said after that, one area resident sprayed it.

"It was quite a large plant," he said. "Then, looking in other areas and surrounding ditch banks, they found quite a lot of plants. It had been there for a while. It's a big, impressive thistle with big, purple blooms on it that were easy to see."

"It took a bit of botany work sending off samples," Porter said in an email Dec. 29. "There was no reason to expect we'd find welted thistle."

But he was appreciative of the



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain
Wallowa County's 2021 Noxious Weed Warrior Jim McCormack shows off the hats and a hammer he received Wednesday, Dec. 29, 2021, in recognition of his efforts to battle invasive weeds in the county.

work by Marcum and McCormack in battling the weed.

"Finding a noxious weed when it first arrives is really important and also to get it controlled when it's small," Porter said. "This is a great example of early detection and rapid response."

Where did it come from?

"We never had those thistles about four or five years ago when a ditch company came through and cleaned the ditch out," McCormack said. "They dumped the pilings on my side of the lower ditch, and the next year they just started coming up everywhere. I think somebody brought them into this county and threw them into that ditch."

But it wasn't necessarily intentional, they said.

"A lot of the ways things like this get spread is through equipment," Marcum said. "Who knows where they were working before, and that's why there's been a big push with a lot of these big corporations and noxious weed managers across the state who are working with power

companies and ditch companies."

Marcum said he can't be sure just how it arrived in the county.

"It's hard to say," he said. "It looks like someone just threw a bunch of seeds right there in the ditch and that's where they started."

Mccormack added that the Stangel Bison Ranch had work done at the same time as his place.

"They cleaned out a section down at Stangels' place, too, and they started coming up there," he said. "There wasn't anything (done) in between my place and theirs."

Why a problem?

"It's a Carduus thistle and that family is one in North America that is invasive," Marcum said. "In every state across the entire country, the Carduus family is an invasive species."

The Carduus family includes welted thistle, musk thistle and plumeless thistle.

"Others (thistles) are invasive, but they're not nearly as problematic as the Carduus family," he said. "It's the way they grow and spread,

they just absolutely kill out everything else around them, like native grasses along ditch banks ... they can just come in and create these massive bare spots and choke out everything else around. They create a mat so that nothing else will grow there."

He emphasized that the thistles choke out crops, alfalfa and grass hay and are poor for erosion control and soil sustainability.

Winning the war

Marcum said welted thistle is nearly gone from Stangels' place.

"They only had two plants on it this year," he said.

But it still exists on McCormack's place and that of his neighbors. Marcum said there were about 50 plants there this year.

"The seeds stay in the ground for a long time," Marcum said. "After the initial treatment in 2016, we saw good residual control until 2020. In 2020, we had a big flush of the welted thistle again and we sprayed probably 200 plants. This year, we saw the residual control back again, but there were still about 50 plants that popped up this year. This is the only site we have in the western United States."

The other North American site is in British Columbia, Canada.

"We have this rotation of checking on them and that's why Jim was nominated to be the Noxious Weed Warrior of 2021," Marcum said. "He lives right in the middle of where this site's at. Not only is he spraying them on his place, but he's calling me when he sees them on the neighbors'. ... He works on other people's properties and sprays other weeds like knapweed and other things."

Mccormack mentioned a pasture that had been sprayed a couple years ago. But he hadn't seen any this year. "There were just rows of them there," he said.

The pasture grass McCormack has planted now seems to be out-competing the thistles.

"I think the treatment and the competitiveness of the (desired) plants helped stop it," Marcum said.

In the spring, he said, the Weed Department will actively start spraying any new rosettes found and continue through August checking every other week or so.

"That's the long-term goal, with it being found in such a small area,

it's a species that we will be able to eradicate eventually, as long as we stay on top of it," Marcum said.

But it will take a while before the county can be sure it has eliminated welted thistle.

"It's been five years now, so it's going to be probably another 15 years before we're confident in saying that it's eradicated," he said.

Supposed to be retired

Mccormack, who has farmed his entire life, had hoped to be retired by now.

"He wants me to keep working," he said of Marcum. "I try to not work outside any more than I have to. I've done that my entire life."

His generational farm has raised cattle, wheat, alfalfa and grass hay. Now he leases much of his land to others to farm.

"I'm just tired of it. I don't want to do it anymore," he said. "I've done it my whole life. My dad started me out there on the tractor when I was probably 6 or 7 years old raking hay."

Marcum, who runs a one-man department, finds farmers and ranchers like McCormack critical to his success.

"We appreciate that there are a lot of landowners in the county who support the noxious weed program and are fighting the battle with us," he said. "That's what it's going to take to get a lot of these species under control."

Mccormack agreed that those who really care about the land are the biggest help. But there are others.

"And there's a lot of landowners who don't really care," he said. "People who are coming in here and just buying a place to build a house on and they don't make their living off the land. Next thing you know, they see all these pretty wildflowers blooming and they don't know they're noxious weeds."

That leads to another aspect of Marcum's job: education.

"That's a lot of what it is now, why we have the booklets that Tri-County CWMA puts out, keeping our brochures up to date and available to people. Outreach and education, it's just as important as on the ground management," he said. "All the counties in Oregon, they're doing the same thing with their weed managers and weed boards. We try to do as much outreach and education as we can."



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