

Local & State

Invasive weed of the week

By Jeffrey Pettingill

The enemy

Russian knapweed (*Rhaponticum repens*, formerly *Acroptilon repens*).

The strategy

Russian knapweed is an invader from southern Russia and Asia. It spreads both by seeds and shoots. It can produce from 6 to 27 black root shoots per square foot, and roots may grow to a depth of 23 feet. This knapweed does not spread by wind as with the other knapweeds. Once the white or blueish-pink flowers are pollinated, the seed head will close up and remain closed until they fall onto the soil surface and are opened up by disturbance (may be years before this happens).

The attack

Russian knapweed causes chewing disease in horses and can grow under a wide range of environmental conditions. Russian knapweed can be found in about every county in Eastern Oregon. It seems to follow Interstate 84 and other highways and if you get onto any ditch or canal you are liable to find some growing along the banks. This weed, which grows thicker than alfalfa, destroys the land.

The defense

Controlling Russian knapweed can be a great chal-



Richard Olds/Contributed Photo
Russian knapweed can spread by seed and by shoots.

lenge. Because these plants spread by underground shoots (rhizomes), controlling it by mechanical means (disking, shoveling, mowing) is fairly useless and will generally spread the invader. There are numerous flower- and root-eating insects that can be released to assist in controlling the weed in sensitive and remote areas. Herbicides such as Milestone (7 ounces per acre), Open-sight (3.3 ounces per acre), or Curtail (3 pints per acre) are

the best ones to use (notice I did not say 2,4-D, Banvel or Roundup).

The best overall control of Russian knapweed is to prevent the weed from becoming invasive in the first place. Healthy pieces of land will keep most weeds from getting started, but once the plant becomes established, get help in controlling it. As always consult with your local weed control professional or call your county weed supervisor for further details.

Series Continues

Jeffrey Pettingill, weed control supervisor for Baker County, will be writing an occasional article about a common noxious weed in the area. Pettingill encourages people to call him if they have weed questions or see a species they're not familiar with. His office number is 541-523-0618 and his cell is 541-519-0204.



Richard Olds/Contributed Photo
A Russian knapweed plant in bloom.

La Grande K-3 students return to school

By Dick Mason

The (La Grande) Observer

LA GRANDE — The atmosphere at Island City Elementary School in La Grande, is ticking up a beat — and for good reason.

Monday, Oct. 5, was a red-letter date for all elementary schools in the La Grande School District, marking the first time since mid-March, when all of the district's schools were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, that some students attended classes at their schools.

The school district has met state safety standards allowing for students in kindergarten through third grade to return to classes in person. This means K-3 stu-

dents no longer have to take classes via distance learning, which they and the rest of the students in the district have been doing.

First-year Island City Elementary principal Brett Smith said there was a heightened sense of anticipation in his school leading to the first day of classes.

"There is a buzz in the building, a very positive one," Smith said. "There is a feeling of hope and optimism."

The principal said teachers are excited, and he feels good about the students returning.

"Kids are not meant to be in front of a computer for hours and hours," Smith said.

Central Elementary School principal Suzy Mayes said

in an email that her staff also is delighted students are returning.

"All of us are excited to welcome our students back to school. Our staff have been preparing their classrooms all week for the day we all have been waiting for," Mayes said.

Many precautions are in effect to protect children from COVID-19. For example, all students will stay in their classrooms throughout the day except when they go outside for recess.

"It will be a family unit," Smith said.

Rather than students going to a cafeteria for breakfast and lunch, meals will come to their classrooms. And restrictions will keep stu-

dents from certain portions of playgrounds and fields, so they will not come into contact with students outside their class and they will not be where other children have been.

Fourth- and fifth-graders at the La Grande School District's elementary schools didn't return to school Monday because state COVID-19 standards for their return have not yet been met. Mayes said she hopes they can be back at school shortly.

"It is truly a bittersweet situation because it feels very awkward to not bring back our fourth- and fifth-graders. We will certainly miss them and hope they join us soon," Mayes said.

COVID-19

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That tally includes one new case on Monday, bringing the county's total to 102 since the pandemic started in March.

For the 2-week period Sept. 6-19, Baker County reported three new cases. During that period, 175 county residents were tested, putting the positivity rate at 1.7%.

The county's weekly positivity rate peaked at 17.1% for the week starting Aug. 30, with the second-highest rate of 13.4 for the week starting Aug. 16. In both cases the driving factor was an outbreak at Meadowbrook Place assisting living community Baker City. That outbreak, which Staten said has been resolved, included 27 cases and the county's two deaths attributed to COVID-19.

During the past 2 weeks, the county has reported a single new case on nine separate days, with multiple new cases on only one day — three cases reported Sept. 29.

Staten said the health department's contact tracers have been able to track some of the recent cases to having had contact with another confirmed case — either a

relative or friend. But in other instances the source of the infection hasn't been confirmed, she said.

Staten said some Baker County residents — she didn't have a specific number — have contracted the virus outside the county, but they are counted as Baker County cases.

Staten said county health officials have not seen clusters of infections associated with any large gathering or event, including the Haines Stampede rodeo July 3-4, or the demolition derby, also at the Haines Stampede grounds, in August.

Even so, Staten said she continues to encourage people to avoid large gatherings, especially ones indoors, and to follow precautions such as wearing a face covering, maintaining social distancing and frequently washing hands.

Of the county's 102 total cases, 92 are county residents who tested positive, and 10 are "presumptive" cases — people who did not test positive but had close contact with someone who did.

Although the Oregon Health Authority lists just four county residents as be-

ing "recovered," Staten said that number is not current because the state agency is no longer updating that figure.

She said during a Zoom meeting convened Sept. 30 by the Baker School District that 38 county residents who tested positive have recovered. Staten said Monday that a person is considered recovered once 60 days have elapsed since the onset of symptoms.

She said some people who are counted as recovered might still have effects from their bout with the virus, but they are no longer infectious.

The number of county residents being tested has increased the past 2 weeks.

The weekly average number of tests from Aug. 16

through Sept. 12 was 80.

The weekly average for the period Sept. 13-26 was 107 tests.

The number could continue to rise, as Saint Alphonsus Medical Center in Baker City, as of Friday, Oct. 2, is offering a COVID-19 test through its curbside clinic, with results available as quickly as 15 minutes, for people who have symptoms.

The Saint Alphonsus curbside clinic also offers a test for people who don't have symptoms, with results available in 4 to 5 days, said Andy Mollahan, lab manager for Saint Alphonsus in Baker City and Ontario.

See Thursday's issue of the Baker City Herald for more about the new testing options.

MANAGER

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Fred Warner Jr., who has been city manager since May 2016, plans to retire at the end of the year.

A total of 14 people applied for the job. On Sept. 17 a selection committee consisting of Mayor Loran Joseph and Councilors Lynette Perry and Jason Spriet trimmed the list of candidates to six.

One of those candidates withdrew Monday morning, leaving five, said Robin Nudd, the city's human resource manager.

In an email to the Baker City Herald, Nudd wrote that councilors plan to announce the names of the finalists during the Council's Oct. 13 regular meeting.

"My hope is that we will have 3 candidates to invite to our community and we will hold meet and greets with the press, community leaders, current council and the newly elected council members," Nudd wrote.

The seven-member City Council, per the city charter, will choose the new manager.

The proposed salary range is \$98,000 to

\$115,000 per year. Warner's salary for the fiscal year that started July 1 is \$104,000.

City officials announced in September that they received applications from people in Oregon, Washington, California and Wyoming, as well as from North Carolina and Missouri.

Nudd declined to release the names of the original slate of applicants, or of the five people the City Council will interview, saying she didn't want to jeopardize the current jobs of those who aren't picked as finalists. She said the city will announce the names of the finalists who will be invited to Baker City.

The Herald filed a public records request Monday seeking copies of all 14 applications. According to the Oregon Attorney General's public records manual, public agencies, if they refuse to disclose the names of job applicants, must show, for each applicant, how disclosure would constitute an unreasonable invasion of their privacy.

"Blanket disclosure policies," the public records manual states, are "not consistent with case law."

PEDALING

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The ride to Halfway wasn't the only act of kindness Schlitz encountered on his journey, however.

He said several people who saw him camping offered to let him pitch his tent in their yard, or even, despite the coronavirus, to sleep in their homes.

"I told them it was up to them," Schlitz said.

He told the good Samaritans that he was fine with staying outside if they were worried. Some insisted that he come inside.

"I've met so many cool people, I think the people have probably been my favorite part of this trip," he said. "That's been really cool."

Schlitz said he wasn't sure in the beginning if this journey was the right thing to do during a pandemic, but he decided he was less likely to contract COVID-19 on the road opposed to staying in New York and Washington.

He has been tested for the virus several times during the trip.

"That was one of my concerns, I didn't want to be going into a small town and spreading it as an outsider where they wouldn't normally get it," Schlitz said. "So I tried to regularly get tested and I've been wearing a mask."

Having pedaled across the nation, Schlitz has seen firsthand the different ways states have handled the pandemic, and ways residents have reacted to it.

"There are some places where I was wearing a mask and people would come to me and ask, like 'You don't believe in this pandemic, do you?' and, again, I was a guest in their state or their town and so I tried to be respectful, but personally I do believe this is happening and we should take the precautions," Schlitz said.

Besides the challenge and the adventure, Schlitz said he also has used his ride as a fundraiser for a yoga studio he worked for that has suffered financially during the pandemic.

"Also, I think I had something to prove to myself that I could do something," he said. "I was tired of just having dreams and saying I was going to do this and that, and this and that, and I wanted to properly do something."

Schlitz said he also really likes adventures, and during his journey he's had quite a few of those.

He ventured into Yellowstone National Park and saw moose, bison, deer and bears. He said people in the East don't worry about bears but when he started coming into the West, everyone was talking to him about bears.

"I remember I had one night I was camping, it wasn't a campsite, I just pulled into the forest and found a spot to camp in, thinking in my tent worrying about bears and wolves — someone had told me there was wolves there the night before — I was like 'oh man,'" Schlitz said.

He encountered other transcontinental cyclists on his journey, including a woman who was also riding solo. Schlitz said she inspired him.

He said the trip has given him time to figure out what he wants to do with his life.

"I wouldn't say I have a better idea after taking it, but I know I want to keep exploring."

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