

October 21, 2015

To: Special Committee on Agriculture & Natural Resources, The Honorable Sharon Schwarz, Chair

From: Margy Stewart, Manager, Bird Runner Ranch; Trustee, Wingfield Township

I am writing to stress the urgency of adding Old World Bluestems (Caucasian Bluestem and Yellow Bluestem) to our Kansas list of Noxious Weeds.

We must do this sooner, rather than later.

Old World Bluestems (OWBs) attack the polyculture of native prairie and replace it with a monoculture of itself that offers very little to graziers and almost nothing to wildlife. Waiting endangers our cattle industry and the jewel of our nascent agri-tourism enterprises, our native prairies.

Waiting means that Prairie Chickens and other prairie creatures will lose habitat. Do we really want an ever increasing number of prairie creatures proposed for listing as Endangered Species? If we are good stewards of our native prairie, the Endangered Species Act will never come knocking on our door. We want to be able to say, as we are currently doing, "Don't list the Prairie Chicken! We are better stewards of prairie habitat than your federal interference could ever be!" But we will not be able to say anything like that in the future if we sit on our hands and do nothing in the face of the threat of invasive OWBs.

The good news is that OWBs can be controlled. Because OWBs form a monoculture, they lend themselves to spot spraying with non-selective herbicides such as glyphosate. With careful spot-spraying, an infestation can be killed without hurting neighboring native plants. In addition, thanks to the research of Extension scientist Dr. Walter Fick, several other herbicides have been shown to be effective for broadcast spraying—killing the OWBs but sparing a proportion of native plants.

The bad news is that OWBs spread quickly, especially in dry years. That means that the longer we wait, the greater the expense of control. Acting now is the "penny-wise" thing to do. Waiting would definitely be "pound-foolish"—a totally unnecessary waste of tax-payer money.

I am speaking from experience in several different areas.

As a Flint Hills landowner and pasture-manager, I was able to keep Caucasian Bluestem from moving from a county roadside into our adjoining native pastures. I did this by following Dr. Fick's recommendation: spot-spraying with glyphosate (expense: less than \$100). I also heeded Dr. Fick's warning: Infestations on roadsides *will* move into adjoining native pastures. Not *might* or *could*, but *will*. But early action protected our most valuable resource, our beautiful native prairie.

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After this successful experience with our own land, our Wingfield Township Board took action to control the infestations on the roadsides throughout our township. We were able to do so for around \$2000. When we took action, adjoining landowners also took action—controlling infestations on their own land—in every case, before the infestations became unmanageably large. A few pasture managers from a neighboring township who were haying Caucasian Bluestem screamed bloody murder when we began taking action—they didn't want the issue even raised—but I noticed every one of those agin-ers attended Dr. Fick's next workshop on controlling OWBs. Some people do hay monocultures of OWBs—but no one wants to exchange the world-class forage value of our native prairies for the lesser palatability and minimal nutritional value of OWBs.

I have also learned about the need to act quickly by soaking up the expertise on offer through informational workshops. I have attended two such workshops with Dr. Fick and one with the world expert on OWBs, Dr. Karen Hickman, accompanied by a field trip with Tom Van Slyke, manager of the Konza Prairie. He has long observed the threat from OWBs and has a decade's worth of practical experience in successfully controlling for OWBs. From these experts I learned that the sooner we start controlling for OWBs, the easier and cheaper it's going to be.

I also learned from these experts that the people with the most knowledge and practical experience are the most optimistic about our ability to defend our native prairies.

In contrast, when our township took action we ran into pessimistic opposition from some county officials. They said, in essence, there's no point in controlling for OWBs because there's no way to do it ; they said also there is no point in controlling OWBs on our county roads because the OWBs will just re-invade from I-70. Needless to say, the first reason is counter-factual--it flies in the face of expertise and experience. The second is nihilistic—it just affirms a race to the bottom. However, it *does* show the need for an immediate designation of OWBs as Noxious Weeds. If counties use state inaction as a reason to do nothing, a Noxious Weed designation would allow state and counties to work constructively together.

In addition, I learned from the experts more about *why* OWBs are lethal to our native prairies and damaging on our roadsides. Interestingly, in their native habitat (Africa & Asia) OWBs are not invasive; they co-exist with co-evolved plants. But here they change the chemistry and the biology of prairie soil so that our existing native plants cannot find the soil microorganisms they need to thrive or the chemical conditions they need to germinate anew. OWBs even repel each other. That's why OWB monocultures are made up of clumps with lots of bare earth in between. There is a lot of gullying in patches of OWBs. (Well meaning people used to plant OWBs on roadsides for erosion *control*, only to find out they were an erosion *cause*.) These chemical and biological effects, combined with cattle's preference for grazing native grasses, means that OWBs take over at the expense of native plants.

Also interestingly, we do have a native mid-grass, Silver Bluestem, that is in the same genus with OWBs. But having evolved here, it is not toxic to our native plants (but maybe it would be to grasses in Africa!).

No wishful thinking will change the biology or the ecology of OWBs and our native prairies. Therefore, we can say one thing for sure: The lethal threat posed by OWBs will manifest itself, and abundantly so, even to people who know nothing of it today. We want them to be able to say, with gratitude, "Thank goodness Kansas acted in time!" We don't want them to have to say, "Why didn't they do something before it was too late?"

So let's take the obvious next constructive step: Let's at least designate these invaders Noxious Weeds.

Thank you for your consideration.