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## Unchecked, buffelgrass will devastate our desert

**Editor's note:** This article is in response to a previous guest opinion ("Buffelgrass criticism is misguided; plant's benefits receive short shrift," Aug. 29).

When it comes to buffelgrass, there should be no confusion. Left unchecked, this invasive weed will devastate our Sonoran Desert — our signature saguaro forests, native grasses and all the wildlife that depend on this diverse and beautiful habitat.

Buffelgrass kills native plants through competition for space, water and nutrients, and by introducing fire to an ecosystem that evolved without it. The fundamental changes buffelgrass creates in our landscape will result in severe economic and ecological loss in our community, potentially converting our diverse Sonoran Desert to a wasteland.

Additional forage for livestock is not needed in our Arizona Uplands. Buffelgrass was first introduced for use as livestock forage and for erosion control because of its ability to grow on many soil types and in very arid environments. What was not known was that buffelgrass would also compete with and kill the more nutritious native perennial grasses.

According to ranchers in the Ironwood Forest National Monument, cattle do just fine without supplementary feeding. The National Resources Conservation Service stopped recommending buffelgrass years ago because of its detrimental qualities.

There is no doubt that buffelgrass kills native plants. It is one of the most scientifically studied invasive species in the Southwest and in northwestern Mexico. Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum research shows that small perennial herbs, seedlings and annuals are decimated in buffelgrass patches. Studies on Tumamoc Hill show that even trees such as foothills palo verde cannot compete with buffelgrass for water.

Research at Saguaro National Park demonstrates that seeds of native species are nonexistent or substantially reduced in buffelgrass stands. Rather than enriching the soil, we now know that buffelgrass stands eventually deprive soils of nutrients (especially nitrogen). This ultimately kills the buffelgrass itself, leaving wastelands behind.

Buffelgrass is not limited to wetter roadsides. It has already invaded our natural desert communities. You can find it growing in areas where our most drought-tolerant native plants — brittlebush and bursages — cannot grow. You can see it growing up the hillsides of Tumamoc Hill, Sentinel Peak, Tucson Mountain Park, Saguaro National Park and Ironwood Forest National Monument.

Once buffelgrass invades natural desert areas it is nearly impossible for native grasses to return without intensive interventions. Sites in Tucson Mountain Park, Saguaro National Park and Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument where buffelgrass has been manually and/or chemically controlled show a return to natural conditions and species without deleterious effects, including the recovery of native grasses.

The state of Arizona has prohibited buffelgrass by placing it on the Arizona Noxious Weed List. Federal, state and local agencies as well as many organizations and landowners have made buffelgrass removal a top priority. The Arizona Governor's Invasive Species Advisory Council targeted buffelgrass as a "formidable invader" in our state.

This resolute and unwavering commitment to the control of buffelgrass will prevent economic losses in ecotourism and development, lowered property values, reduced wildlife habitat and loss of our treasured Sonoran Desert ecosystem.

Arizonans have made a wise decision. Buffelgrass must go.

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