



We must fight buffelgrass now - our prosperity depends on it

By Sarah Smallhouse Special To The Arizona Daily Star | Posted: Friday, June 10, 2011 12:00 am

Fires and jobs are at the top of the news in Arizona. For decision-makers, they should be top priorities. In Southern Arizona, controlling buffelgrass will both prevent fires and protect jobs.

Left unchecked, buffelgrass will dominate the desert landscape and cause regular, fast-moving wildfires that can burn neighborhoods, ruin view scapes, close popular attractions and even interrupt essential services.

The growing fire risk and environmental damage will hurt tourism and make it harder to attract good employers and retain high-skilled workers. Besides, buffelgrass fires will become increasingly expensive to fight.

We can and should do a better job of mitigating these risks, but it can happen only with full collaboration among jurisdictions. The least-costly approach to controlling buffelgrass is to follow a prioritized and disciplined strategy.

We should tackle high-risk and -value areas first. Both public and private landowners must be held equally accountable. Resources must be pooled to save cost and maximize effectiveness.

For the past three years, the nonprofit Southern Arizona Buffelgrass Coordination Center has educated the public, engaged policy- and decision-makers, and built the necessary tools for a realistic, multijurisdictional effort.

A computerized database is now available to map buffelgrass occurrence and track control efforts, making sure that treatments are long-lasting and the spread of buffelgrass is truly arrested.

A mapped risk assessment was completed for Pima County that integrates fire danger, conservation values and the role of roadsides in buffelgrass dispersal to identify hot spots for mitigation. SABCC helped develop a computerized model that can simulate buffelgrass spread and be used to evaluate different treatment scenarios.

With modest resources and in a short amount of time, SABCC and its partners have laid the groundwork for collaborative management of buffelgrass and desert wildfires.

Volunteers have been hard at work for more than a decade to protect some of our most pristine and beloved places.

Tucson Mountain Park and Saguaro National Park are prime examples. Make no mistake - volunteers have made a difference. But volunteers cannot keep pace with the accelerated spread of the buffelgrass invasion. Private support, while appreciated and always put to good use, is insufficient.

Buffelgrass control is in the public interest and demands swift, sustained and well-supported government action.

SABCC and its partners, through extensive leveraging of resources, have made significant headway in developing a framework to address this regional problem. Stable support now must be put in place to implement timely and effective action. This will require committed and undivided participation by regional stakeholders.

Too often we hear that budgets are too tight to worry about buffelgrass. This is a weak and unconvincing argument - the cost of doing nothing now and facing environmental degradation and wildfires later far exceeds the cost of implementing control measures today.

Policymakers and budget directors need to face up to this responsibility - and fast. To procrastinate is to be penny-wise and pound-foolish. We must insist our officials provide public safety and protect resources for our continued prosperity.

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