

# PIMA ASSOCIATION OF GOVERNMENTS

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## **For immediate release**

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## **Buffelgrass Summit draws more than 120 people to address growing concern of plant species invasion**

More than 120 representatives from state and federal agencies, county and municipal governments, academia and private conservation organizations joined with concerned citizens at a Buffelgrass Summit on Feb. 9 to develop an action plan to control the invasive plant species commonly known as “buffelgrass.”

Buffelgrass Summit participants met in Tucson to share information about the aggressive spread of buffelgrass, an invasive weed, and to develop an action plan to control the threat it poses to the region’s signature saguaro forests, wildlife habitats and economic wellbeing.

The summit was sponsored by Pima County, the University of Arizona, Pima Association of Governments, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), the City of Tucson and the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum.

Invasive plant species are increasing their foothold in Arizona with serious consequences for natural resources and regional economies. Buffelgrass (*Pennisetum ciliare*), a fire-prone African perennial grass that is spreading rapidly across the desert landscapes of southern and central Arizona, kills native plants through competition for space, water and nutrients, and introduces fire into an ecosystem that evolved without it.

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Left unchecked, the spread of buffelgrass will have serious and long-term consequences including:

- Escalating fire risks in what used to be a fireproof and maintenance-free desert landscape
- Mounting threats to prominent national parks, forest land and conservation properties
- Rapid conversion of Sonoran Desert ecosystem to flammable grassland
- Threats to viewsapes and landscapes at popular tourist destinations

The state of Arizona has prohibited buffelgrass by placing it on the Arizona Noxious Weed List. Although federal, state, and local agencies as well as many organizations and landowners have made buffelgrass removal a top priority, the action plan developed at the Buffelgrass Summit represents the most comprehensive and collaborative effort to control it in central and southern Arizona.

According to USGS Senior Scientist Julio Betancourt, "Buffelgrass is spreading exponentially. Populations of buffelgrass appear to be doubling in size every year, and so is the cost of mitigation. The time to act is now, and we must act decisively. A critical time for control efforts will be the 2007 monsoon season when buffelgrass will green up enough to spray effectively."

Pima County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry said this issue is more than any single agency or organization can tackle. "It will take all of us planning and working together," he said.

The Buffelgrass Action Plan calls for an immediate reduction in the existing reservoir of buffelgrass to the greatest extent possible. The long-term objective is to map, prioritize and remove buffelgrass throughout this area, and to maintain vigilance to prevent it from becoming widely reestablished.

The major outcome of the summit was the validation of a proposed action plan to pursue governmental, private and community-based efforts to control buffelgrass. Each participating agency gained a better understanding of the scope of the threat and the need for immediate, coordinated action to control the weed while the task is still manageable.

These actions need to be sustained over time to prevent the conversion of Sonoran Desert to African grassland, as has occurred in many areas of northern Mexico. Participants at the Summit overwhelmingly endorsed a "Sense of the Summit Resolution" which declared:

The establishment of buffelgrass throughout central and southern Arizona is a serious and long-term threat that must be addressed in as comprehensive, effective

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and expeditious a manner as possible. A Buffelgrass Management Plan, initially focused on public lands and rights-of-way, is urgently required. Successful mitigation of buffelgrass impacts over the region will require that citizens, agencies and all levels of government cooperate across jurisdictional boundaries to counter this threat.

“There is hope,” said Marilyn Hanson of Sonoran Desert Weedwackers, a volunteer group supported by Pima County Government and active since 2000. “Sites in Tucson Mountain Park where buffelgrass has been removed show a return to natural conditions and species, including the native grasses.”

For more information, please visit <http://buffelgrass.org> which will be online by the end of the week.

*Pima Association of Governments is an association of local, state and tribal governments with a mission to build consensus among its members and the public on regional planning for transportation, air quality and water quality. PAG’s staff gather and analyze data, provide accurate information, and coordinate an open and cooperative planning process to promote good decision-making for the region. Please visit [www.pagnet.org](http://www.pagnet.org) for more information.*