

Dec. 29, 2008

For immediate release

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Beat Back Buffelgrass Day set for Feb. 7

2nd annual event seeks volunteers to help remove invasive weeds

The Sonoran desert that surrounds us appears as exotic, beautiful and timeless. Yet, this wonderment of nature is threatened by an invasion of plants that, given a few short decades, will surely destroy the desert, unless we act soon. The offending plant is called buffelgrass and it is rapidly gaining a chokehold on the desert.

Why is this so? Sadly, it is a common tale. In our desire to use nature to our benefit, this plant was imported to the United States in the 1930s for use in livestock grazing. Buffelgrass also grows in dense clumps and this feature was ideal leading to the plant being extensively used for erosion control. Today, it is still planted for livestock feed in Sonora, Mexico, and in Texas.

In recent years, the consequences of importing species of plants and animals from other locations for their beneficial features have become apparent – and often very damaging to the environment and native species. Tamarisk was planted in the 1930s to control soil erosion and has since taken over most riparian habitats in the western United States, with the loss of the cottonwood tree ecosystem. Kudzu, a native vine from Southeast Asia and Japan, also was imported to the United States and used for soil erosion. It is now the major invasive plant in the southeastern United States. These invasive species disrupt and can alter the natural ecosystem to the point that some native species no longer exist.

Buffelgrass is especially harmful to the Sonoran desert given its ability to rapidly colonize new areas, its ability to grow in clumps that crowd-out native species and because it has introduced the threat of wildfire to an ecosystem that has evolved in an environment free of fire. When dry, as it is most of the year, buffelgrass burns readily and at a temperature exceeding 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit and as buffelgrass colonizes more areas, the threat of fire increases. The Sonoran desert environment is not adapted to fire and a buffelgrass fire will destroy native desert species, leaving a sea of buffelgrass in its wake.

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Over the past 10 years, buffelgrass has extended its range into the Tucson metropolitan area and is now found in most neighborhoods and the foothill communities. Most often, it is seen along roadsides. A dramatic panoramic photograph of the Catalina Mountains facing Tucson allows viewers to zoom-in on patches of buffelgrass that have been established on these slopes (the photograph can be seen online at <http://www.gigapan.org/viewGigapan.php?id=12587>).

Comparing this photograph to earlier views shows that buffelgrass is spreading at an increasing rate. Dennis Dickerson, PAG's environmental program coordinator, observed, "It's the desert environment that surrounds us that makes Tucson so special, and action is needed now because this invasive weed will, if unchecked, destroy the desert."

Several years ago, a small group of dedicated volunteers, known as the Sonoran Desert Weedwackers and those concerned with the spread of buffelgrass in Tucson Mountain Park, began to dig out buffelgrass plants one by one. Their monthly efforts over the past several years have stemmed the tide of the buffelgrass invasion in Tucson Mountain Park and removed it entirely from some areas. Even so, the weed has a firm toehold – and areas where the plant has been removed must be closely monitored and revisited if, and when, a resurgence occurs. The Sonoran Desert Weedwackers have led the way and last year, volunteer efforts in the region began to take off.

Pima Association of Governments (PAG) organized Buffelgrass Eradication Day on March 1, 2008, when over 200 volunteers fanned out across the region and removed 4,000 plants. The second annual event of this highly successful effort, now renamed Beat Back Buffelgrass Day, will take place on Saturday, Feb. 7, 2009.

Volunteers are encouraged to join removal efforts across the region. Removal events will be organized in the City of Tucson, Saguaro National Park, Tucson Mountain Park and by Tanque Verde Weedwackers, another volunteer group working on the east side. Other locations are almost certain to join the effort.

Individuals and groups wishing to participate can volunteer by logging onto www.PAGnet.org or www.Buffelgrass.org and selecting a location where organized buffelgrass removal efforts will occur.

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 for more information.