

The root of the problem

Plans to manage invasive plant species in the Mono Basin are underway

by Clare Cragan

Lee Vining Creek is a hop, skip, and a jump from the Mono Lake Committee offices, and serves as a good reminder of nature's restorative power. Rushing water, vibrant shades of green, and trumpeting bird songs are all signs of the creek's returning good health. Yet even as the willows and wildflowers flourish, so do other more tenacious and habitat-threatening plant species. One in particular is the fragrant bouncing bet, a lovely five-petal flower that grows in abundance along Lee Vining Creek. But don't be fooled by the flower's sweet scent! Bouncing bet has some unpleasant characteristics.

A pervasive invasive

Bouncing bet (*Saponaria officinalis*) is an invasive plant species that spreads quickly, replacing native vegetation particularly in areas of plentiful water. The California Exotic Pest Plant Council has labeled bouncing bet as one of the "most invasive wildland pest plants; documented as aggressive invaders that displace natives and disrupt natural habitats." This exotic plant has done exactly that along the banks and exposed creek bed of Lee Vining Creek, and is now pervasive in the creek's delta. Bouncing bet is also poisonous, so plants growing near water may potentially threaten fish in the recovering creek.

Why not let nature take its course?

Most of the restoration techniques used along damaged Mono Basin streams emphasize encouraging natural processes to help the creeks recover. However, letting nature take its course with invasive plant species poses serious problems. If left untouched, bouncing bet could cover vast areas along Lee Vining Creek, out-competing varieties of native flowers, shrubs, and trees to create a monoculture—a situation where there is no diversity in the plant life. In the case

of invasive plant species like bouncing bet, human intervention is a crucial part of the restoration process; it's frightening to imagine how the future habitat might look without any management!

A plan of action

In July of 2005 the Mono Lake Committee received a grant from the National Forest Foundation to develop a management plan for invasive plant species in the Mono Basin. During the past six months Mono Lake Committee and Forest Service staff mapped areas of infestation and researched methods to control several kinds of invasive species. Although bouncing bet poses the most significant problem, cheat grass, Russian thistle, and woolly mullein are also prolific and problematic in the Mono Basin. Each invasive species has specific habitat requirements and creates unique threats to the environments where it grows, and will eventually require specific removal techniques. As the snow begins to melt, removal teams will use these newly created maps to track down where the invasive plants exist and begin to dig, pull, and uproot.

The help of many hands

Bouncing bet is a difficult plant to remove from creek banks because it can re-sprout an entire plant from even the smallest small fragment of a root left in the ground. Successfully removing bouncing bet requires not only uprooting the plant but also sifting the soil to ensure no root fragments are left behind. Since bouncing bet is found along the entire length of lower Lee Vining Creek, eradicating the well-established plant will take much time and effort. Such a large undertaking requires the help of many hands.

This spring, Mono Lake Committee staff and volunteers will head to the creeks with students from Lee Vining Elementary School to begin pulling

bouncing bet. Groups of youth and young adults participating in the Mono Lake Committee's Outdoor Experiences program (see article page 12) will also lend helping hands along Lee Vining Creek this spring, pulling invasive species and planting young Jeffrey pines. Volunteer help is essential for the success of this difficult project!

Thanks goes to the National Forest Foundation for providing the means to begin thinking long-term about the effects of invasive plant species in the Mono Basin. With a careful eye the Committee and Forest Service will be watching where bouncing bet sprouts as winter becomes spring. Hopefully, with a little help nature can take its course again along Lee Vining Creek. ❖

Lend a hand!

Are you planning a visit to the Mono Basin this May? Join the Mono Lake Committee for a spring restoration day and get your hands in the dirt! On Saturday, May 13th volunteers will be heading down Lee Vining Creek to dig up bouncing bet and replant native vegetation. Enjoy great scenery, hard work, and good company during this restoration day. Meet at the Mono Lake Committee Information Center & Bookstore in Lee Vining at 10:00 am; we will walk to Lee Vining Creek from there. Contact Policy Coordinator Clare Cragan (clare@monolake.org) at (760) 647-6595 if you're interested in helping out. Tools, gloves, snacks, and a lesson in invasive plant ecology provided; just bring a hat, sunscreen, water, sturdy shoes, and clothes you can get dirty.

Clare is the Committee's Policy Coordinator. In her spare time she has been sleuthing out all of the live music she can find in the Eastern Sierra.