

Weed Warriors Action Program Expansion
Applicant: Environmental Resource Center (ERC)
Staff Report to LAB on Expedited Review of Pre-Application

To: Levy Advisory Board (LAB) and Tom Bergin
From: Wendy Pabich, LWWP Program Coordinator
Date: May 11, 2022

LAB Expedited Project Review Process

The Applicant seeks funding to support project efforts beginning May 2022 and therefore seeks Expedited Review of the project. County Staff encourages the LAB to consider invoking the Expedited Review Process as described in the attached Guidelines (approved May 1, 2014). Staff concludes the Project meets the goals of the Levy and criteria of the LWWP, and that given its nature and relatively small size, Expedited Review is appropriate. If the LAB chooses to proceed with an Expedited Review, the expectation is that the Pre-Application would be considered in place of a Full Application and the review process would ensue during the LAB meeting.

Project Summary

Invasive weed spread is swift and vast, with a single plant capable of producing tens of thousands of seeds that can quickly reach even the most remote and pristine areas. This can have devastating consequences: Invasive weeds can cause habitat alteration, and many are toxic to wildlife, reduce native plant, alter nutrient cycling in the soil, reduce water availability, and affect soil erosion.

Blaine County has twenty-five known listed noxious invasive weeds, many with deleterious impacts. Spotted Knapweed, for example, can increase soil mineral nutrient loss, surface water runoff, and stream sedimentation, negatively affecting the aquatic environment, disrupting wildlife habitat, and acting as a toxin to cattle and elk. It is estimated that eight million acres of lands in Idaho are severely impacted by noxious weeds, threatening to “destroy Idaho’s natural beauty and economy” (Idaho Department of Agriculture).

The ERC’s Weed Warriors Action Program Expansion seeks to support and amplify existing work being done by the Blaine County Noxious Weeds Department and the US Forest Service. Under the guidance of Blaine County Noxious Weed and US Forest Service, the ERC manages volunteers and seasonal staff to effectively combat invasive weed spread through hand-pulling weeds, introducing bio-controls, and restoring areas of treatment with native species by seeding or planting. ERC’s hands-on approach provides direct action to prevent the spread of invasive weeds while also directly educating the public about the importance of stopping the spread of weeds.

In the inaugural year of the Program (2021), high priority areas were targeted. These areas included well-trafficked trails and campsites where weed seed can be introduced into the natural environment and riparian zones where pesticide use is detrimental to the ecosystem. The Program successfully treated 450 acres during 28 weed-pulling events.

The ERC requests \$25,000 or 48% of a total project cost of \$52,074 from LWWP to pay for a Program Manager (May-October), four seasonal Summer Staff, transportation, and native seed for reseeding projects. Over three hundred local students are expected to participate in targeted weed pulling events and native reseeding events under the

supervision of the program manager. The remainder of project costs will be covered by funds secured from the National Forest Foundation and the Sawtooth Society. These funding commitments recognize the effectiveness and collaborative nature of the Program. The Program will be partnering with Kay Draper, the Blaine County Noxious Weeds Department Support Specialist, and Debarah Taylor, Sawtooth National Forest Botanist with the US Forest Service.

Expected Conservation Outcomes

In 2022, ERC seeks to expand the program by doubling the number of sites and events. The list of planned sites ranges from US Forest Service lands including the Little Wood Drainage (Copper Creek), SNRA Headquarters, Deer Creek, Greenhorn Gulch, Fox Creek, Lake Creek, Adam's Gulch, and Boundary Campground (Trail Creek), to public recreation and open spaces (e.g., Founder's Field, Rotarun, Howard Preserve, and BCRD bike path), and a number of river access points (e.g., near Broadford Bridge, Big Wood Bridge, Warm Springs, City of Ketchum, and Zinc Spur).

The Applicant estimates over 80,000 invasive weeds will be removed (for knapweed plants, that will prevent 2 billion seeds from being spread) and 800 acres treated. Ten acres will be reseeded with native seed or plantings. In coordination with the Blaine County Noxious Weed Department and the US Forest Service, the program will also collect field data on weed removal and spread that will allow the organizations to update their own databases with current information and inform future operations. LWWP funding will allow the Program to increase its effectiveness in combating the spread of weeds throughout Blaine County by increasing the geographic area and field time of the program.

Alignment with LWWP Goals

Of the eight Primary Conservation Goals set out in BCC Resolution 2008-71 and the LWWP Program Guide, this project meets the following three goals:

- Protect water quality, rivers and streams, riparian corridors, flood plains, wetlands and water rights.
- Protect and preserve wildlife, habitat, and transit and migration corridors.
- Conserve, restore, or maintain and otherwise provide for proper stewardship of lands and waters.

Minimum Criteria for LWWP Funding

All criteria must be met at Full Application stage.

- 1) Blaine County location? Yes.
- 2) Serves 1+ primary Levy goals of protecting land, water or wildlife? Yes.
- 3) Landowner committed lands for the project? Yes.
- 4) Qualified entity willing to take responsibility for the completion, maintenance and enforcement of the project? Yes.
- 5) Matching funds being sought? Yes.
- 6) Lasting conversation value sought? *As is common with non-acquisition projects, this question requires LAB discussion. Relevant issues include the degree to which lasting conservation is possible, how it will be managed for, what guarantees will be in place, etc.*

Analysis

This project represents an important effort to actively manage the spread of invasive weeds without toxic chemicals and to restore areas previously impacted by invasive weeds. This project, like the recently-funded Wood River Wolf Project, focuses on strategies that, by definition, are more ephemeral than “shovel-in-the-ground” projects, yet have been shown to be effective and environmentally-compatible approaches. Given the potential for rapid spread of unmanaged invasive weeds and the significant risks to our ecosystems, this is an important effort.

LAB Considerations

The guidelines for Expedited Review ask that the following be considered by the LAB when deciding whether to activate the Expedited Process. Staff comments are incorporated below:

- Whether the project appears to meet the levy goals generally. **[Yes.]**
- Whether the project meets the six minimum criteria. **[Yes.]**
- The completeness of the Project’s application materials, which must identify all permits or formal approvals required by Blaine County and other entities prior to implementing the project, and the status and expected timeline of each. **[Sufficient.]**
- Whether the BCC has directed the LAB to consider the project under EP. **[No.]**
- Whether the director of the County’s Land Use Dept. has offered an opinion. **[No.]**
- The time-pressure or urgency of the matter, e.g., a natural disaster. **[ERC is looking to begin this project in May 2022, so time is of the essence.]**
- The complexity of the project. **[Staff assessment is that the project is fairly straightforward.]**
- The amount of money being asked of the LWWP. **[The ask is fairly nominal and consistent with the LAB’s previous decision to invoke the Expedited Process.]**
- The existence of, capacity of, and LWWP history with, any Partners. **[The LWWP has no prior experience working with ERC, though the Blaine County Noxious Weeds Department has been working with ERC on this effort.]**
- The degree to which LWWP funds will be leveraged. **[52% of project costs will be borne by other entities].**
- The degree to which other entities have reviewed or will review the project. **[It is assumed that all other funding entities have previously reviewed the Program.]**
- The risks of project failure and the LWWP’s ability to mitigate them. **[Risks are unclear and it seems LWWP has limited ability to mitigate them.]**
- Whether the Program Coordinator has been involved in the project and can provide the LAB with analysis. **[This Staff Report is a result of analysis by the Program Coordinator.]**
- Whether consideration of the project under EP will meet the LAB’s quorum requirements for approval of a Full Application. **[This requires attendance by at least 5 of 7 current LAB members; Invitation for a Full Application requires an affirmative vote by the majority of a quorum, or, for example 3 of 5 members and 4 of 6 or 7 members.]**

- Any effects that pursuing the EP or the project may have on other project applications in process. **[None.]**