THE BIG BAD BROTHERS OF CHEATGRASS

So even though we are into the middle of winter and not really thinking about forage and what is growing on our land now is the time to educate ourselves. The Livestock Seminar is coming up January 12, in Deer Lodge and we have some great topics that will be presented and one of them is going to be Cheatgrass and some discussion about the big brothers: Medusahead and Ventenata. All are invasive annual grasses and all are becoming a big problem in the west. I decided there was too much to talk about in one article, so we will make this a continued series but mostly focusing on the ones we don't know much about and that is Medusahead and Ventenata.

Medusahead, what a name, right? It is an annual bunchgrass that grows from six to 24 inches tall. It has long awns pointing outward and upward that take on a twisted appearance as they dry out in mid to late summer. Thus, the creation of the name after the Greek mythological monster Medusa who had snakes twisting on top of her head. It has wiry stems with a few short narrow leaves and is a bright yellow-green color. Unlike perennial grasses it has a shallow, easy to pull root system.

First found in Montana in 2013 and was added to the noxious weed list in 2017 as a high priority species for early detection and eradication. Right now, it has only been found in Sanders and Lake Counties which for Powell County is not that far away. It is also in several surrounding and western states.

Because it is an annual it only reproduces by seeds. Seeds can be viable for up to five years so not letting it go to seed is key. Awns have tiny barbs that allow seeds to adhere to clothing and animals fur, which can result in long distance spread. Seedling emerge in the fall and initiate regrowth early in the growing season, reducing available soil moisture for perennial grasses. It is also even more invasive and often displaces cheatgrass.

Medusahead has a high silica content so it is slow to decay and accumulates dense lays of litter or thatch which increase fire danger and prohibits new perennial grass seedlings from germinating. Because it is high in silica it makes it unpalatable not only for livestock, but wildlife avoids it as well. In fact, a stand of Medusahead can decrease grazing capacity by up to 80 percent and reduce biodiversity and economic value of the land.

Since it has only recently been confirmed in the state it is important to be able to identify this species so new populations can be controlled when they are still small and manageable. It is critical to avoid traveling through Medusahead, do not overgraze and take care of your perennial grasses as they can be good management tools. There is not much in the toolbox for herbicide management for Medusahead but using herbicides that are labeled for cheatgrass will have the same type of control.

We have free MontGuides on Medusahead with pictures of the plant to help identify it. Next week we will talk about the other big bad brother: Ventenata.

For more information contact the MSU Powell County Extension Office at 846-9791

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