

Exotic Plant Management Teams: An update on the successful model in action

By Linda Drees

EXOTIC PLANTS INFEST approximately 2.6 million acres (1,052,220 ha) in the National Park System, reducing the natural diversity of these places. With funding from the Natural Resource Challenge, the National Park Service has established rapid-response Exotic Plant Management Teams (EPMTs) to control exotic plants. Modeled after wildland firefighting strike teams, EPMTs deploy highly trained, mobile forces of plant management specialists who assist parks in controlling exotic plants.

Each of the 16 EPMTs serves multiple parks within a broad geographic area. They work through steering committees to identify, develop, conduct, and evaluate the removal of exotic species, and undertake appropriate native species restoration efforts. Each team has developed site-specific strategies for combating exotic plants that reflect the needs and resources of the parks they serve.

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The teams continued to make substantial progress in the control of harmful invasive plants on parklands in 2003. Seven teams were deployed during the summer. These new teams joined nine established teams, increasing the number of parks getting professional plant control to 219. In FY 2003 they inventoried exotic plants on more than 619,000 acres (250,695 ha), and found gross infestation of weeds on 518,898 acres (210,154 ha), which they treated. Since their inception in 2000, the teams have controlled at least 12 exotic plant species to a maintenance level.

The success of the EPMTs comes from their ability to adapt to local conditions and needs. Each team employs local experts and sets its own work priorities based on various factors: severity of threat to high-quality natural areas and rare species, extent of targeted infestation, probability of successful control and potential for restoration, opportunities for public involvement, and park commitment to follow-up monitoring and treatment.

Adaptive management is a critical part of the EPMT response. As the teams have grown, program managers have recognized the need for increased capability in setting priorities for control and restoration. As a result, the program, in conjunction with the Colorado Plateau Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit and the Intermountain Region restoration ecologist, is developing a tool, which will be available in two years, to set priorities for control. Additionally, in order to improve the assessment of technologies used for control, the team in southern Florida is collaborating with the NPS Environmental Quality Division and regional parks to develop a landscape-scale



Invasive plant species are difficult to control not only for their abundance in many national parks but also because of other challenges such as inaccessibility.

environmental impact statement for vegetation management. This is the first such effort for vegetation management in the National Park System and serves to streamline compliance actions. Parks in the Great Plains EPMT geographic area are conducting similar landscape-scale compliance.

Teams share operational information with private- and public-sector organizations, which have reviewed the NPS EPMT model with interest, studying and adopting aspects of the model. For example, in August 2003 at the Heinz Center workshop on invasive species databases, the fundamentals of the Alien Plant Control and Management Database (APCAM) were highlighted.

Through partnerships the National Park Service has leveraged more than \$2.8 million toward control of invasive plants. For example, collaboration with the University of Florida and the U.S. Department of Agriculture addresses impacts of invasive nonnative agricultural plants in natural areas of the U.S. Virgin Islands. A new program with



In 2003 the California Exotic Plant Management Team controlled pampas grass (*Cortaderia jubata*) growing on the Wildcat Cliffs of Point Reyes National Seashore, an effort that required climbing skills and careful attention to safety.

Natural Resource Challenge evaluated favorably by OMB

By Abigail Miller

The Natural Resource Challenge was one of the first government programs to be the subject of an Office of Management and Budget (OMB) requirement initiated in 2002. OMB's new Program Analysis Review Tool, or PART, was first applied to the Challenge in September 2002 for use in conjunction with development of the FY 2004 budget. The administration introduced this process to reform budget development by establishing a single tool for evaluating program performance and using the results as the basis for budgetary decisions. The PART score for 2002 was 72, considered very respectable. The process identified weaknesses in the NPS financial management system and the need for a comprehensive review of the Challenge by an objective party. A subsequent broadened review of the Natural Resource Stewardship and Science Directorate, which included the Natural Resource Challenge, was conducted in 2003 for the FY 2005 budget and resulted in an even higher draft score. Further information on PART and the 2002 evaluation is available from OMB's websites (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/> [search on "PART"] and <http://www.whitehouse.omb/budget/fy2004/pma.html>). ■

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the Student Conservation Association uses "native plant corps," which will increase capabilities to control invasive plants and restore native species while training young professionals. In addition, through the Secretary of the Interior's Cooperative Conservation Initiative, several teams received grants to work with partners for invasive weed control to restore parklands.

It is a golden time for managing invasive species in national parks. Broad recognition from partners, visitors, and institutions indicates that invasive species are a major threat to our natural heritage. The increases in funding for invasive species management have certainly reflected this recognition and also demonstrated commitment. ■

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