

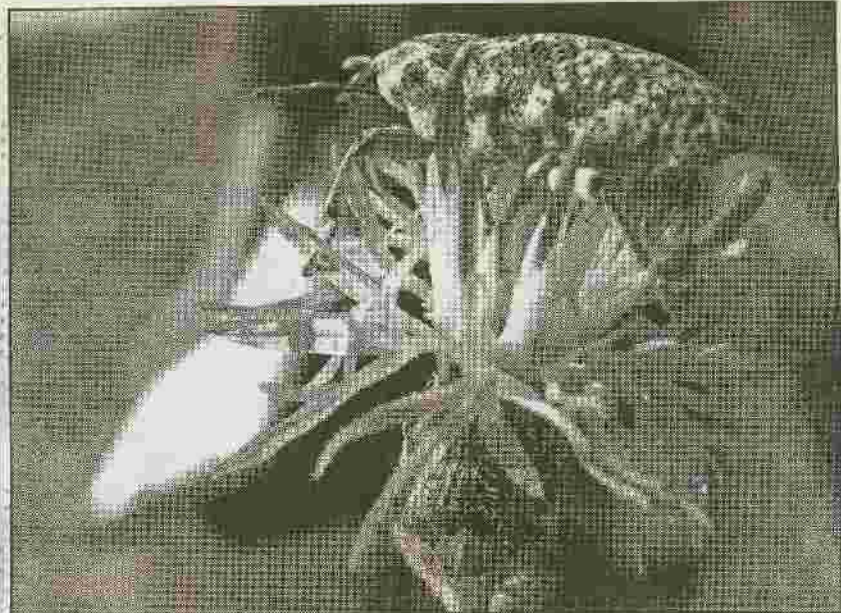
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A stem-mining weevil is being monitored as it eats through Dalmatian toadflax.

Weevil munches its way through a noxious weed at Home Valley site

In Home Valley, the Dalmatian toadflax population has a new enemy. A stem-mining weevil, *Mecinus janthinus*, has made itself at home, eating its way through one of Skamania County's least wanted noxious weeds.

This natural biological control (or biocontrol) was first released at the state Department of Transportation site four years ago. There was one more release; the site now reveals shriveled, dying stems, half-chewed leaves, and very few seeds.

Through the Integrated Weed Control Project, a state-wide program administered by Washington State University Extension and funded by the Forest Service, biocontrol agents are provided at no cost to landowners and land managers to manage weed infestation.

Before a biocontrol agent can be released, it undergoes rigorous testing to determine what effects it may have on species other than the target weed. Researchers expose the insects to native and cultivated plants. Insects may be exposed to over 80 plants species and testing can take up to

15 years to complete.

After reviewing the results, the Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (USDA - APHIS, a great acronym) determines whether the insect is safe to release and issues release permits.

"When we get a new weed from another country, they come without any natural enemies and the weed gets to live the good life without any natural controls," says Todd Murray, Skamania County's WSU/Extension educator. "Biological control reunites the non-native weed with its own natural pests to make life harder for the weeds in Skamania County."

Release sites are selected by a collaboration between the county's weed control office and landowners, public or private. Ideally, a site is at least one acre, and will have no planned major soil disturbance such as development, tilling or mowing.

Biocontrol can sometimes be used with other control methods but a strategy is needed to be effective. Results vary over time, depending on conditions and weed

and insect species, but impacts may be noticeable within three to five years.

With an ultimate goal of control, not complete eradication, selected sites are monitored up to 10 years.

In Skamania County, biocontrol agents have been released through IWCP since 2005. In 2009, nine releases totaling 2,220 insects were done to control Dalmatian toadflax, Canada thistle and diffuse and spotted knapweed.

"Our most successful and encouraging site in 2009 has been the dramatic reduction in Dalmatian toadflax at Home Valley in Skamania County," says Jennifer Andreas, the IWCP director.

Releases of biocontrol agents are set for March 2010 for Canada thistle and May 2010 for Scotch broom. Contact Jennifer Andreas to experience a release or learn more about biocontrol agents.

You can call the county's Noxious Weed Control program coordinator, Justin Bush, at 509-427-3941 or go to the new website, www.skamania.wsu.edu/noxiousweeds/.

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