

A very nasty annual grass

By Larry Hyslop



Medusahead growing near Harrison Pass

This grass does not look especially bad, looking a bit like foxtail barley. It grows near Harrison Pass and is maybe six-inches high. A good clue to its nature, however, is this thick patch of medusahead contains no other plants.

Bring up medusahead in a conversation with land managers and they will shake their heads and add comments like “let’s just hope it doesn’t spread too much around here”. This invasive, annual grass worries a lot of people. It is not a good when people prefer cheatgrass over medusahead, especially since medusahead can outcompete cheatgrass. According to my copy of *Weeds of the West*, ranches infested with medusahead have lost from 40 to 75% of their grazing capacity. One Internet source states “This aggressive winter annual grass is changing the ecology of western rangelands in North America.” It covers 6,000 acres in Paradise Valley and 2,000 acres in Utah’s Cache and Box Elder counties. It is definitely not good for wildlife like mule deer and sage-grouse and reduces their usable habitat.

The problems with medusahead are several. It begins growth in winter and early spring, before other plants start their growth. Its roots can outcompete other plants for moisture. It creates monocultures with plant density as high as 2,000 plants per square foot where no other plant can live.

The grass stems accumulate silica and cattle will not eat it. At least cheatgrass can be controlled somewhat by winter grazing by cattle. A stand of medusahead builds up a lot of litter on the ground, since the silica breaks down slowly and nothing eats it. This litter limits the germination of other plants but helps its own germination. After a few years, this litter can be five inches deep and is a huge fire hazard. Medusahead seeds carry barbs which catch on animal fur, human clothes and vehicles to be transported to new locations.

Plowing and discing, followed by reseeding, can greatly reduce the amount of medusahead but will not eradicate it. Controlled burns followed by reseeding have worked in some cases but in other studies, the medusahead came back after the fire. Treating it with Roundup, especially after burning the litter, can help reduce the amount.

Brett Glover is the local Invasive Species Coordinator for the Humboldt-Toiyabe Forest. He has been working for several years to eliminate this 60-acre patch near Harrison Pass. He had managed to kill most of it at one time but budget problems got in the way and the medusahead has come back. He treated it this spring, using a new herbicide, resulting in smaller plants this year. Herbicide is usually applied in fall, but Brett has found too much of the chemical stays on the thatch and does not get into the roots, so he tried to kill the green shoots this spring.

He worries about medusahead and feels it will spread across Elko County. Medusahead prefers to start in heavy, clay soils but once established, can invade areas with lighter soils. He says grazing it in early spring can remove some of the new, green shoots and even better, the livestock’s feet tend to

break up some of the thick litter. But to do any good, the livestock must be forced into eating green medusahead.

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