

# NEWS RELEASE – WEED OF THE WEEK SERIES

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## Weeds of the Future

During the last four months, I have written articles about what may seem to some as an inordinate number of invasive plants growing throughout the Okanagan-Similkameen. Unfortunately, there are many more species knocking on our doorstep waiting for an opportunity to move in. This week's article outlines two invasive species that have not yet moved into our region - rush skeletonweed (*Chondrilla juncea*) and yellow starthistle (*Centaurea solstitialis*). The BC Ministry of Agriculture and Lands has classified both species as provincially noxious because they are highly destructive, competitive and difficult to control.

Rush skeletonweed is one of the most recent invaders in the province. It is native to Eurasia, where it is found from southern Russia to North Africa. Skeletonweed is also found from France and Portugal to Turkey and Iran, central Asia and the Mediterranean Basin of Europe. The Balkans are considered near the centre of distribution. To date, rush skeletonweed has remained predominantly within the confines of the North Okanagan with the odd plant creeping southwards into the Central Okanagan. In BC, the first discovery of this European perennial was made in Vernon in 1983, however it has since been discovered in the Kootenays. Rush skeletonweed grows from 0.4 to 1 metres (1.3 – 3.3 feet) tall with a deep and extensive root system. The stems and roots of rush skeletonweed exude a white latex sap when cut. As the name suggests, it has a skeletal look with many thin stems covered with inconspicuous narrow leaves and individual or clustered flower heads. Each flower head contains 10-12 bright yellow flowers with distinct lobes or teeth. A distinguishing characteristic of rush skeletonweed is the presence of coarse, downward pointing brown hairs near the base of the stem. Rush skeletonweed spreads by seeds that are largely wind dispersed, and also reproduces vegetatively from roots. A single, multi-stemmed plant may produce as many as 15,000-20,000 seeds, which readily invade rangelands, roadsides and disturbed habitats at mid-elevations in the dry grassland zone of the province.

Yellow starthistle is a member of the knapweed family. As with other members of the knapweed family, yellow starthistle originated from southern Europe but it was introduced from Chile to California during the gold rush. It has spread rapidly since the mid-1900s and is now estimated to infest 15-20 million acres (6-8 million ha) in California and a couple of additional million acres in other western states. Mature plants are 60 to 90 cm (2-3 feet) tall with rigid, branching stems covered with cottony hairs. The flower heads are yellow, located singly at the ends of branches. The characteristic knapweed bracts on the flower head are modified as sharp, 2 cm long straw-coloured thorns. Bottom leaves are deeply lobed while upper leaves are smooth and sharply pointed. This winter annual may produce up to 170,000 seeds per plant when growing conditions are ideal. Interestingly, sheep, goats or cattle are effective in reducing seed production when grazed after plants have bolted but before spines form on the plant. Starthistle is best adapted to open grasslands with deep well-drained soils and average annual precipitation between 10 and 60 inches (25 and 150 cm) per year. While there are currently no known infestations of yellow starthistle in BC, the closest infestation occurs in Washington State a mere 20 kilometres south of the border.

Without control, rush skeletonweed and yellow starthistle will form dense infestations, outcompeting native plants and crops. These invaders pose a serious threat to the sandy soils of the Okanagan and Similkameen valleys, and are also of concern to the rangeland resource of this region. Rangeland infestations impact both the cattle industry and wildlife, as aggressive species such as skeletonweed and starthistle displace native or beneficial forage species. Also, yellow starthistle is also known to cause a neurological disorder in horses called 'chewing disease'.

Landowners can help to prevent these species from invading the Okanagan-Similkameen by reducing soil disturbance and not allowing new infestations to establish. Suspicious plants should be reported to the regional weed coordinator for confirmation, so that new species such as these are eradicated before we allow an opportunity for them to spread.

**For more information on invasive plants, contact Lisa Scott, Weed Coordinator for the Okanagan-Similkameen Regional District at (250) 492-0237 or email [info@rdos.bc.ca](mailto:info@rdos.bc.ca)**

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