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Thirsty trees get heave-ho

If left unchecked, prolific tamarisk could squeeze out native vegetation

By [Rodger L. Hardy](#)

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LAKE SHORE — There was some serious weed-whacking going on Saturday near the shore of Utah Lake.

Some 50 people hacked away at bunches of non-native plants that consume so much water that, if left unchecked, could suck dry an aquifer and effectively eliminate native cottonwood and willow trees.

The tamarisk plants are now an inch in diameter but would grow into massive plants several feet thick if allowed to mature, according to state wildlife officials.

Tamarisk, a plant native to Asia, makes poor habitat for wildlife, said David Lee of the state Division of Wildlife.

Tamarisk plants were brought to the western United States to control erosion and serve as windbreaks, but they spread rapidly and populate more than 1 million acres, Lee said.

Poisoning the stumps of young trees was the first project of the season for Lee, who conducts several weed control projects a month during the spring, summer and fall.

"The roots go 100 feet down," he said of the sturdy tree. "If you pluck them they look like a carrot."

While native plants will use 100 gallons of water a day, the tamarisk sucks up twice as much and absorbs the salts and other minerals from the water into its leaves. The leaves fall off in winter and the salts are excreted into the soil. As a result, nothing will grow under the trees.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that 2 million to 4.5 million acre feet of water are consumed each year on the 1 million acres in the western United States infested with tamarisk. That's enough water for 20 million people or to irrigate 1 million acres of cropland, Lee said.

While native cottonwoods and willows do well with water having a salt content of 1,500 parts per million, tamarisk trees thrive on a salt content of 41,000 parts per million, or 31 times the



Scott Root of the Division of Wildlife Resources cuts down a thicket of tamarisk near Utah Lake.

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tolerance of native plants, Lee said.

Many of the trees eliminated Saturday and placed into large piles, however, were entwined in greasewood bushes, which the hackers and cutters spared.

The trees spread their seeds from their first year of life, and by the time they reach full growth they can cast off some 500,000 seeds a year. The young trees that met their fate Saturday came from tamarisk trees a former landowner planted along a dike.

Wind and water spread their seeds to the field.

"It's pretty important to spend the energy and money to get rid of (the tamarisk tree)," said American Fork's Susan Garvin, a Forest Service employee.



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E-mail: rodger@desnews.com

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