



**Western Invasive Weed
Workshop November 19, 2015**

Closing remarks/Workshop Summary
Noreen Walsh, Regional Director, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Good morning everyone.

Am I the only one who did not know who Bob the Builder was? I was so intrigued by Ted Koch's mention of him, so I did some research. Lo and behold: I found out he's working in the sage-steppe ecosystem too. And since his constant refrain is "YES WE CAN!" I thought it appropriate that he be up here this morning as we close out our time together.

Thank you to Ken Mayer and his team – they are the reason we came together here to about invasive weeds in the sage-steppe ecosystem, which to me, embodies the concept of the American west. It's the fiber and the fabric and the heritage of a vast swath of our country. And it's in a fight for its life. It's threatened by some insidious invaders. On this topic, I alternate between fear and hope. Fear and hope.

I am worried about this threat. We are really standing on a precipice. Are we going to have some semblance of the native vegetative community that existed at the time of first contact with Europeans, or are we going to have cheatgrass and ashes?

We all know this problem is not just the Great Basin. I have seen plenty of cheatgrass in Wyoming and Colorado. In fact, our "eastern portion of the range" breakout group yesterday had one clear message for the rest of the world:

"DON'T FORGET US. There's still time and great opportunity to stop things before they get any worse.....so don't ignore the eastern portion of the range."

So I ask you: are we going to let cheatgrass and medusahead and those 17 other species complete their inexorable march across OUR west?

What's at stake?

Wildlife – and frankly that's what got me involved. The greater sage-grouse led me to this dance, and as Jeremy Maestas said, the grouse is the symbol that is on all our ballcaps. Thanks to SGI! But again, you and I know that the grouse is a symbol, a representative, a surrogate for 350 species of native wildlife that exist in sage-dominated

ecosystems, many of which are being put at risk due to the increasing dominance of invasives.

Sustainable ranching – we heard an anecdote yesterday: “don’t get rid of the cheatgrass; it’s all the cows have to eat.” But that was followed by an admission that if they had a robust perennial bunchgrass community the cows would be better off!

Homes and rural communities – people and families - threatened by too frequent rangeland fire fueled by cheatgrass

These things are all at risk.

You have all heard the acronym, the phrase NIMBY? “*Not in my backyard.*”

Usually used in an exasperated fashion, to describe people or groups who don’t want something, some development or some industry, or some activity to happen close to them. I would submit to you that is exactly what we need to be in this case. We need to be proud NIMBYS. Because the sagebrush sea is **America’s** backyard. Are we going to let this happen to America’s backyard?

Not that we haven’t been trying, not that we haven’t been busy doing things - clearly we have!

But as the WAFWA report pointed out, and all our conversations here in Boise have showcased: we can do better and we can do more. We can be more focused, we could be better organized, we could be more collaborative across all our disciplines, and we could be better storytellers.

As for storytelling, Ted Koch reminded us: language matters! Invasives and fire...not fire and invasives. I would also submit that “Weeds” doesn’t do the job to tell this story. In this room, and on the ranch, we all know what that means. But what do your urban friends and neighbors think about when you say you are coming to a “weed” conference? What do our elected officials think about? Dandelions? Lawn care? The word may invoke images of an irritant or a nuisance or a just cosmetic issue...but not a threat to the entire western US and a working way of life and a billion dollar recreational economy.

We all understand the word “weeds”. But WE are the choir. And we are singing to ourselves. And whatever vocabulary we decide on, we all need to use it consistently if our story is going to get noticed.

Alan Clark told us that one of the things that made the Utah Watershed Restoration initiative work was an obvious threat with a big idea – in his case, the big idea was to restore healthy watersheds for ALL interests (water, wildlife, livestock forage, fuels and fire risk) – all users could see the potential benefits to themselves.

We need to work on our storytelling in this way, because the only way to make progress here is if people beyond us in this room actually care about this problem and how it will impact them. As Jamie Reaser told us, we need to work at the scales above that green line, we need to engage people not just about “*what* or *how*”, but at the level of their values and their spirit, if they are to see this as an urgent issue needs to be addressed for their interests.

Well, what can we learn from history about how to have the kind of success we need in addressing this complex problem?

Early in 1939, the scientific community discovered that German physicists had learned the secrets of splitting a uranium atom. Fears soon spread over the possibility that Nazi scientists could utilize that energy to produce a bomb capable of unspeakable destruction.

Albert Einstein, who fled Nazi persecution, and Enrico Fermi, who escaped Fascist Italy, were now living in the United States. They launched a quiet campaign to inform the right decisionmakers, including the President, of the dangers of atomic technology in the hands of the Axis powers. Out of this beginning, came the Manhattan Project - a research and development project that produced the first nuclear weapons during World War II.

There are some lessons for us here.

At the advent of the Manhattan Project, there was an extreme urgency to come together to solve a problem before it was too late - the Nazis provided urgency. I feel that urgency here in the sagebrush sea, and in our case, let's be honest: the grouse provided a catalyst.

With the Manhattan Project, 1) clear leaders were identified, and 2) those leaders had the authority to draw from all over to pluck the right people for the team, from multiple disciplines, and regardless of where they currently worked.

They broke other rules too. They were located within the Army Corps of Engineers, and they created a new Corps District – a district that had no geographic boundaries, yet it did have authority to pursue the solution.

If you read the history of the effort, you will become convinced that certain factors led to their success in a pretty short time frame:

the interaction among dozens of professionals from all scientific, physical, and mathematical fields (this is parallel to the mix of “ologists” Virgil Moore talked about, when he said “*solutions will come from the mix of disciplines.*”)

the scientific and mathematical brilliance of those people – the raw talent – and that's you all in this room,

as well as coordinated research and development plan - members of the team had a common game plan and each had their part

Because of these factors, they succeeded in developing the technology that gave birth to the atomic bomb in a very short time frame. It was considered the pivotal engineering and scientific success of the Twentieth century.

This is a sad example, and whatever each of us might think about the morality of the project that resulted in the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan, their solution to a complex problem in a short time was remarkable.

We need our own Manhattan Project. We cannot each go back to our own stove-piped organizations, to our independent responsibilities, to attending a conference once a year, to treating the symptoms of our invasive weed “toothache” instead of the root cause.....and think we will make a difference.

Jeremy Maestas told us that sage grouse have high site fidelity – they return to the same leks no matter the condition – and he equated that to stubbornness! This is an example we need to avoid: we cannot do the same old things because they are what we know, we cannot return to individually treating the symptoms of invasive weeds and wonder why the toothache never goes away.

We need an organization that works, that is up to this complex problem. A problem whose solution may start with science, but does not end there.

We heard a lot of talk from Dr. Sheley and from Ken Mayer about the cup being half full. Half full. Well that’s great – I’m all for optimism, but I’m also for action, so how are we going to fill up this danged cup? Because I am pretty sure half full is not going to do it!

Well, we have a great start this week. I think this may be the first in the history of invasives in the sagebrush ecosystem that we have every relevant agency present. We’ve never had this conversation before, but if we don’t keep it together, fear is going to win and hope is going to lose. This has been an incredibly collaborative climate – we’ve seen it in every meeting and breakout session, all hands are on deck and creating synergy at this meeting. We must establish a plan to keep that up.

Next, maybe we commit to breaking all the usual rules about how agencies do business. What can we learn from the Manhattan Project, and also, what can we learn from how we fight fires? That’s a highly integrated approach in almost every respect: people come together from a multitude of agencies, into an all-lands effort with accepted and common incident command protocols, with strict accountability, and with dedicated resources to do the job at hand. That might just be the exact opposite of how we have been trying to manage invasive species – on our own, from within our own organization, returning to our own comfortable box on the org chart. I think we need to mix it up!

Lastly, I think we need to get it together on the research: We’ve learned more about managing sagebrush and invasives in last 10 years than in last 50 years. But the research funding pie will only ever be so big, and basic questions remain unanswered so we really need a consensus focus.

I wish I could tell you when we leave today we can put a check in the win column. But we can’t. It’s going to take a lot more from each and every one of us to ensure hope will win out over fear.

I want to end by going back to the beginning. Lieutenant Governor Little was our first speaker, and he hearkened back to what his forefathers did to protect the water and the soil in Idaho. And he wondered what our descendants will think of our efforts. He concluded by saying: “the only thing I will ask is that you keep trying; you are doing the Lord’s work.” I suspect many of you feel the same burden, the same compulsion, the same sense of stewardship he was alluding to, and that is what has brought us together this week.

I hope this common thread is strong enough to keep us together, moving forward, to the point where we realize that when it comes to the complex challenge of invasive weeds in the west: "YES WE CAN!"

Thank you.