

Volunteers slow the spread of invasive plants along Mill Creek

by Max Henkels

White sweet clover sounds like a harmless, even friendly, plant. Along lower Mill Creek, however, it is not as innocent as its name may suggest. White sweet clover is an invasive species originally from Europe that can produce over 350,000 seeds per plant, each of which can remain viable for over 80 years. This incredible productivity has allowed the plant to rapidly spread along Mill Creek in recent years. The sweet clover scourge is particularly visible from the crossing at Cemetery Road—a dense thicket lines the banks upstream and downstream of the road, dominating riparian habitat and pushing out native plants.

In June, Project Specialist Erik Lyon and I scouted Mill Creek below Highway 395 in order to map and inventory invasive species locations and plan removal efforts for the summer. Exploring this stretch of the Mono Basin watershed we discovered that despite its density in the lower reach of Mill Creek, sweet clover has spread less than half a mile upstream from the Cemetery Road culvert.

Since sweet clover seeds can disperse through streamflow, the most effective method of control is to start at the top of the infestation and work downstream to prevent the spread of the plant upstream and to limit seed dispersal closer to Mono Lake.

The key to controlling sweet clover is removing the second-year plants, which reduces the amount of seed in the riparian zone. If this process is repeated for several years, it will eventually reduce the amount of seed and allow the



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This year volunteers removed 1,500 pounds of white sweet clover from the banks of Mill Creek.

native plants to recolonize the banks. The timing of these efforts to reduce the seed bank of non-native invasives is especially critical as we anticipate increased streamflows on Mill Creek in the future.

Armed with clippers, trash bags, and an endless supply of enthusiasm, volunteers made huge progress in the campaign to control the spread of sweet clover on Mill Creek this year. Invasive removal outings included a free lunch and a presentation by a local naturalist. These field trips were a great success—more than doubling the number of volunteers and hours worked from last year. This allowed us to remove a record amount of sweet clover from Mill Creek—over 1,500 pounds!

Hearing from local naturalists made the events fun and educational; thanks to gull researcher Kristie Nelson, botanist Ann Howald, Mono Lake Tufa State Natural Reserve Interpretive Specialist Dave Marquart, and Mono Lake Volunteer Rich Foye.

The Mill Creek restoration program is made possible by a generous conservation grant from our friends at the outdoor clothing company Patagonia. We would like to give Patagonia, the naturalist leaders, and our volunteers huge thanks for a great season of restoration. For those who missed out, don't worry—there is more to do next year! If you are interested in helping out next summer, please contact Project Specialist Emma Oschrin (emma.oschrin@monolake.org) at (760) 647-6595. ❖

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At Mill Creek, volunteers stuff invasive white sweet clover into bags before the plants go to seed.