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# MEMORANDUM

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Date: November 7, 2022

To: The Honorable Chair and Members  
Pima County Board of Supervisors

From: Jan Leshner   
County Administrator

Re: **County Actions to Manage Buffelgrass and Other Invasive Species**

The Board received an email recently from a constituent with a number of questions concerning buffelgrass and the role of the County. Attached is the response sent to the constituent that includes information compiled by Pima County's Department of Environmental Quality (PDEQ), Regional Flood Control District (RFCD) and other County departments. At the request of Supervisor Scott, this memorandum also details County department and RFCD actions with respect to buffelgrass and other invasive species.

## Regional Flood Control District

The Regional Flood Control District (RFCD) owns and manages over 32,000 acres of land within Pima County. While the invasive eradication need is both beyond available taxpayer funded resources, and seasonal demand is beyond what local contractors can provide, the District has actively prioritized since 2006 the management of buffelgrass/noxious weed control within public drainageways, constructed ecosystem restoration and multi-purpose projects, and sensitive open space floodplain areas.

Between July and September of 2022, the RFCD and its contractors inspected 1,720 acres for buffelgrass and other high-risk noxious species, and as a result, 346 acres had chemical or manual eradication actions. The RFCD tailors a Seasonal Weed Control Priority List based on site conditions, and buffelgrass and fountain grass are the highest priority. The District performs regular inspections and treatments to preclude further infestation.

In the past three years, Jennifer Becker, RFCD restoration Land Specialist and Environmental Planning Manager, has leveraged existing invasive species expenditures as match funding for over \$600,000 in grant award funds to expand Pima County's invasive species management programs. With grant funding, the District hires local landscape companies, Tucson Audubon's (TAS) specialty "Invasive Strike Team," and Recon Environmental specialty restoration crew from San Diego. Other partnering entities include members of the Sonoran Desert Cooperative Weed Management Area (sdcwma.org), for a more effective regional approach.

The RFCD has extended grant award funding to provide buffelgrass control for other Pima County partners not limited to the PDEQ's waste transfer stations and retired landfills, and the Regional Wastewater Reclamation Department for Stinknet control at their facilities. The RFCD works with the Natural Resources, Parks & Recreation Department (NRPR) to provide support to their staff regarding inspections and treatment for invasive species on the Chuck Huckelberry Loop. The District also coordinates control efforts with the Pima County Department of Transportation who undertake invasive species treatment activities on roughly 4,000 acres of landscape right of way.

With the recent grant award planned for early 2023 implementation, Pima County will be providing more effective invasive eradication efforts along General Hitchcock/Mt. Lemmon Highway per an agreement with the Coronado National Forest. Additionally, collaborating agencies including the Arizona Native Plant Society and TAS will provide educational outreach to neighborhoods. With this new grant, the County will provide additional roadside and drainageway eradication efforts adjacent to neighborhoods that: a) are actively eradicating buffelgrass/fountain grass/stinknet and b) joining the Arizona Department of Forestry and Fire Management [Firewise USA Program](#). Other collaborating entities include the Coronado National Forest, who separately are planning to treat buffelgrass in proximity to the southern Forest boundary within the Catalina Foothills.

Ms. Becker and agency partners recently developed a low-grow "Rapid Recruiter" seed mix specifically designed to restore native vegetation cover where active invasive eradication is ongoing. In July 2022, we used this seed mix at the jurisdictional dams at the Arroyo Chico Park Avenue Basin project with good results.

Additional information and associated public outreach related to comprehensive flood protection programs and floodplain management services are available at <https://webcms.pima.gov/cms/one.aspx?portalId=169&pageId=60305>

#### Natural Resources, Parks and Recreation

NRPR has a long history of education and engagement with the community regarding the threats posed by invasive species and solutions to the problem. These efforts began in the late 1990's and have continued to this day. In April 2021, the Board was provided a [memorandum](#) regarding invasive species; that memo included a report that outlines mapping, treatment, and outreach activities by NRPR staff and volunteers over the decades. Activities specifically related to public outreach have included presence at community events, development of invasive species outreach [materials](#), development and delivery of [classroom curricula](#), hosting buffelgrass pull [events](#), and [presentations](#) to groups interested in learning more. More recently, Pima County has contracted with the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension for a half-time position whose primary role is to increase public outreach about invasive species. NRPR's [Environmental Education](#) staff are developing a new parks stewardship program and invasive species identification, education and removal will be a central theme of that effort. Also, NRPR recently received a \$165,000 grant from the Arizona

Department of Forestry and Fire Management for buffelgrass removal in a wildland-urban interface in the Tucson Mountains; education and outreach to the affected community is an integral component of that grant. NRPR is also pursuing other grants, each of which will include public outreach.

Pima County has a long history of collaborating with local, state, and federal partners around the invasive species issue. As part of the [Outside Agency Program](#), Pima County provides approximately \$46,000/year to the Arizona Sonora Desert Museum (ASDM) specifically for invasive species outreach, education and collaboration. ASDM, in turn, hosts the [Sonoran Desert Cooperative Weed Management Area](#), which is a hub for collaboration among agencies, including the USDA Forest Service.

#### Transportation

Pima County's Department of Transportation (DOT) also dedicates staff to eliminate buffelgrass and fountain grass, and any other invasive species every time landscaped Right of Way's are sprayed. In conjunction with RFCD staff, work has been done since the early 2007, as well as participating with the University of Arizona to properly identify and eliminate the invasive species.

When DOT has large Capital Improvement Projects, buffelgrass is sprayed the season before construction so that when utility relocations and other construction activities begin there will only be limited or no buffelgrass present.

There is also a standard condition for all rezonings and planning projects and processes for the developer to have a continuing responsibility to remove buffelgrass from the property.

#### Environmental Quality

PDEQ educates the public about the threat of these invasive grasses through their [website](#). PDEQ also educates constituents directly after receiving complaints and offers presentations to community groups or home owner associations upon request. PDEQ does not receive dedicated funds for work associated with invasive species so staff time spent on this is covered through other program fees or grants.

PDEQ responds to all complaints related to the Buffelgrass ordinance with a letter notifying the property owner (only for private property located in unincorporated Pima County) of the ordinance and their requirements to abate the problem. PDEQ also provides detailed information with the letter that shows them how to identify it and the best ways to go about mitigating it. Although PDEQ does have the legal authority to conduct enforcement beyond the letter, funding for enforcement is limited.

The Honorable Chair and Members, Pima County Board of Supervisors  
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Summary

County departments and the RFCD are active in managing buffelgrass and other invasives, and collaborate extensively with other agencies and experts to find effective ways in dealing with what will continue to be a persistent challenge.

JKL/anc

Attachment

c: Carmine DeBonis, Jr., Deputy County Administrator  
Francisco Garcia, MD, MPH, Deputy County Administrator & Chief Medical Officer  
Steve Holmes, Deputy County Administrator  
Barbara Escobar, Director, Department of Environmental Quality  
Victor Pereira, Director, Natural Resources Parks & Recreation Department  
Suzanne Shields, Director, Regional Flood Control District  
Kathryn Skinner, Director, Department of Transportation

**From:** Barbara Escobar  
**Sent:** Friday, November 4, 2022 2:21 PM  
**To:** (email address removed)  
**Cc:** Natalie Shepp <[Natalie.Shepp@pima.gov](mailto:Natalie.Shepp@pima.gov)>  
**Subject:** Invasive Grasses Fire Hazard and Threat to Sonoran Desert Habitat

Hello Ms. Peri,  
Please see responses below to the questions you posed to the BOS on 10/22/22.

**1. Is this Board aware that Buffelgrass and Fountain Grass have been declared noxious plants by the State of Arizona.**

Yes, Pima County is aware that Buffelgrass and Fountain Grass have been declared noxious plants by the State of Arizona.

**2. Why is this Board not doing more to make property owners aware and active on the threat these invasive grasses represent to native plants as well as the fire threat to property and assets.**

The Pima County Department of Environmental Quality educates the public about the threat of these invasive grasses through their [website](#). PDEQ also educates constituents directly after receiving complaints and offers presentations to community groups or HOAs upon request. PDEQ does not receive any funds for work associated with invasive species so staff time spent on this must be covered through other program fees or grants.

Pima County Natural Resources, Parks and Recreation (NRPR) also has a long history of education and engagement with the community regarding the threats posed by invasive species and solutions to the problem. These efforts began in the late 1990's and have continued to this day. In April 2021, the Board was provided a [memorandum](#) regarding invasive species; that memo included a report that outlines mapping, treatment, and outreach activities by NRPR staff and volunteers over the decades. Activities specifically related to public outreach have included presence at community events, development of invasive species outreach [materials](#), development and delivery of [classroom curricula](#), hosting buffelgrass pull [events](#), and [presentations](#) to groups interested in learning more. More recently, Pima County has contracted with the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension for a half-time position whose primary role is to increase public outreach about invasive species. NRPR's [Environmental Education](#) staff are developing a new parks stewardship program and invasive species identification, education and removal will be a central theme of that effort. Also, NRPR recently received a \$165K grant from the Arizona Department of Forestry and Fire Management for buffelgrass removal in a wildland-urban interface in the Tucson Mountains; education and outreach to the affected community is an integral component of that grant. NRPR is also pursuing other grants, each of which will include public outreach.

Beginning in 2006, the Pima County Regional Flood Control District (District) has also actively prioritized the management of buffelgrass/noxious weed control within public drainageways, constructed ecosystem restoration and multi-purpose projects, and sensitive open space floodplain areas. The District owns and manages over 32,000 acres of land within Pima County; the invasive eradication need is both beyond available taxpayer funded resources, and seasonal demand is beyond what local contractors can provide.

Between July and September of 2022, the District and its contractors inspected 1,720 acres for buffelgrass and other high-risk noxious species, and as a result, 346 acres of infestations had chemical or

manual eradication actions. The District tailors a Seasonal Weed Control Priority List based on site conditions, and buffelgrass and fountain grass are the highest priority. The District performs regular inspections and treatments to preclude further infestation.

In the past three years, the District has leveraged existing invasive species expenditures as match funding for over \$600,000 in grant award funds to expand Pima County's invasive species management programs. With grant funding, the District hires local landscape companies, Tucson Audubon's (TAS) specialty "Invasive Strike Team" and Recon Environmental specialty restoration crew from San Diego. Other partnering entities include members of the Sonoran Desert Cooperative Weed Management Area ([Sonoran Desert Cooperative Weed Management Area](#)) for a more effective regional approach. The District has extended grant award funding to provide buffelgrass control for other Pima County partners not limited to the Department of Environmental Quality's waste transfer stations and retired landfills, and the Regional Wastewater Reclamation Department for Stinknet control at their facilities. The District works with the Natural Resources, Parks & Recreation Department to provide support to their staff regarding inspections and treatment for invasive species on the Chuck Huckelberry Loop. The District also coordinates control efforts with the Pima County Department of Transportation who undertake invasive species treatment activities on roughly 4,000 acres of landscape right of way. The District agency partners recently developed a low-grow "Rapid Recruiter" seed mix specifically designed to restore native vegetation cover where active invasive eradication is ongoing. In July 2022, seed mix was used at the jurisdictional dams at the Arroyo Chico Park Avenue Basin project with good results.

Additional information and associated public outreach related to comprehensive flood protection programs, floodplain management services and riparian habitat and environmental brochures are available at <https://webcms.pima.gov/cms/one.aspx?portalId=169&pageId=60305>.

PCDOT also dedicates staff to eliminate buffelgrass and fountain grass, and any other invasive species every time they spray landscaped Right of Way's. In conjunction with RFCD staff, work has been done since the early 2007, as well as participating with the University of Arizona to properly identify and eliminate the invasive species.

When PCDOT has big Capital Improvement Projects they spray the buffelgrass the season before construction so that when utility relocations and other construction activities begin there will only be limited or no buffelgrass present.

There is also a standard condition for all rezonings and planning projects and processes for the developer to have a continuing responsibility to remove buffelgrass from the property.

**3. Is this Board willing to use its platform to increase messaging to the community via other entities, for example the Pima County Treasurer's Office and the Arizona Daily Star?**

Pima County will continue to seek additional opportunities to inform the public of buffelgrass and other invasive species.

**4. Is this Board willing to develop a working relationship with the U.S. Forest Service to deal with the potential fire threat in the foothills of the Santa Catalina Mountains?**

Pima County has a long history of collaborating with local, state, and federal partners around the invasive species issue. As part of the [Outside Agency Program](#), Pima County provides approximately \$46,000/year to the Arizona Sonora Desert Museum (ASDM) specifically for invasive species outreach, education and collaboration. ASDM, in turn, hosts the [Sonoran Desert Cooperative Weed Management Area](#), which is a hub for collaboration among agencies, including the USDA Forest Service. However, coordination with the National Forest Service is limited because much of the mountain in the Tucson

and Oro Valley areas is part of the Pusch Ridge Wilderness Area. The Bighorn fire has resulted in a proliferation of buffelgrass from the foothills to above 5,000 ft. elevation. The District is conducting a study with the University of Arizona on impacts from the fire and the recovery.

With the recent grant award planned for early 2023 implementation, Pima County will be providing more effective invasive eradication efforts along General Hitchcock/Mt. Lemmon Highway per an agreement with the Coronado National Forest. Additionally, collaborating agencies including the Arizona Native Plant Society and TAS will provide educational outreach to neighborhoods. With this new grant, the County will provide additional roadside and drainageway eradication efforts adjacent to neighborhoods that: a) are actively eradicating buffelgrass/fountain grass/stinknet and b) joining the Arizona Department of Forestry and Fire Management Firewise USA Program (<https://dffm.az.gov/fire/prevention/firewise>). Other collaborating entities include the Coronado National Forest, who separately are planning to treat buffelgrass in proximity to the southern Forest boundary of the Catalina Foothills.

**5. There is an Ordinance in place for Buffelgrass (and another one should be for its cousin Fountain Grass) BUT it is NOT being enforced, WHY?**

The Pima County Department of Environmental Quality responds to all complaints related to the Buffelgrass ordinance with a letter notifying the property owner (only for private property located in unincorporated Pima County) of the ordinance and their requirements to abate the problem. PDEQ also provides detailed information with the letter that shows them how to identify it and the best ways to go about mitigating it. Although PDEQ does have the legal authority to conduct enforcement beyond the letter, funding for enforcement is limited.

If you have further questions, please feel free to contact me.

*Barbara A. Escobar, Director*  
Pima County Department of Environmental Quality (PDEQ)  
33 N. Stone, 7th floor, Tucson, AZ 85701  
P-520-724-7363  
[www.pima.gov/deg](http://www.pima.gov/deg)