

MCL Ag Land Use Committee

Friday, July 25, 2014, Marin County Farm Bureau

Judy Teichman and Sally Gale co-chaired the meeting, held 9 to 11 AM at the Marin County Farm Bureau Board Room in Pt. Reyes Station. Nona Dennis, Jana Heal, Pam Reaves, and Ann Thomas. Others present included Marin County Assistant Agricultural Commissioner Stefan Parnay, UC Davis weed specialist Guy Kyser, David Lewis, UCCE, George Clyde, Mike Gale, Rich and Jackie Grossi NPS outreach coordinator Melanie Gunn and NPS Range Manager Devi Rao, MOMs Debbie Friedman, Burr Heneman, John Taylor, Michelle Cooper, MALT, and Jeffrey Westman, Marin Organic.

A. Presentation on Wool/Purple Distaff.

Guy Kyser, Weed Specialist at UC/Davis Plant Sciences Department, gave a talk and PowerPoint slide show, about thistle biology and management, growing conditions, locations favorable to propagation, and removal methods including efficacy of various herbicides used. Among his comments:

- Purple star thistle likes moist lowland soils, similar to its lands of origin in southern Europe and southwest Asia. It is thought to have arrived in the U.S. as a crop seed contaminant. It is a short-lived perennial with a big taproot and germinates from seed all winter, which is a control problem. Because it is generally in lowland it can be mowed; mowing during early flowering stage can limit seed production but usually does not control the plant. UC Davis trials suggest that Transline or Milestone herbicide applied in late winter, are effective in controlling purple star thistle.
- Woolly distaff does not grow as widely in California as the purple star thistle but is concentrated in coastal areas. It germinates in late winter and likes to grow on steep rocky hillsides, so mowing is not a viable strategy. Because it is closely related to safflower, biocontrol agents cannot be used (they would attack the safflower as well as the thistle).
- Farms or ranches that have organic certification cannot use herbicides and some organic operations have dropped their certification in order to remove weeds such as the thistle.
- Most distaff removal methods use herbicides; there are no effective manual or non-herbicide removal strategies. Grazing, mowing, and burning are also used, and there have been studies using combinations of hand clearing, burning and various herbicides to try to identify a reliable integrated method. Hand clearing is very slow and labor intensive. Transline, Capstone, Milestone, and Perspective, all of which target distaff, have been tested. Transline and Milestone, applied in mid to late winter, appear to be the most effective. Except for Perspective, they do not have grazing restrictions, and as they are specific to thistle are not toxic for people.

Guy addressed additional issues in response to questions. These included:

How invasive weeds spread. Guy said he suspects seeds travel along cattle trails but there is not intensive research on this. Sally Gale said the cows don't walk from ranch to ranch and she believes wind is a factor, but Guy said he thinks seeds are a little too heavy to be moved much by wind, and he doesn't think birds move them much.

Obstacles to research on organic methods. These include the need for a larger area than chemical testing would require, which means giving up productive land for a year or so.

Chemical industry influence. Companies have some influence on what is tested, as they are willing to fund studies of their products. This does not, however, influence the findings and skewing research results could harm a researcher's reputation. Research on organic methods relies on independent funding, mostly available for IPM research.

Effect of Herbicides on Wildlife. EPA and wildlife agencies regulate herbicide use on or near wetlands and forested areas.

Training Cows to Eat Distaff. A field trial was done locally in which cows ate distaff, but it was pointed out that the distaff in this case was coated with molasses, and that cows cannot be trained to eat plain distaff.

Stefan Parnay, Assistant Agricultural Commissioner, said the size of weed infestations is a big issue, and until organic methods are available ranchers need to use the tools that are available.

There were statements to the effect that UC/Davis research is sometimes disparaged because of the funding the school receives from companies that want their products in trials. Mike Gale said he would like a study that evaluates both organic and non-organic methods in which the results would be accepted as credible.

Stefan and others underscored the need for improved collaboration and sharing of information among interested parties, including agencies and researchers, about pest removal or control strategies so that all parties have the benefit of what is known. The County Agricultural Commissioner's office is working on this.

B. Presentation on Marin Agriculture: Growing Diversity

UC Co-op Extension Advisor David Lewis showed a PowerPoint with a number of charts summarizing key statistics and trends. Marin agriculture consists primarily of pasture and grazing livestock agriculture, with less than 400 acres of the combined 165,000 acres in agricultural production being used for row and orchard crops. Diversification has been increasing over the last 25 years, with the growth of value-added production and direct marketing of locally produced agricultural products.

In 2013, total value of Marin agricultural productions was more than \$80 million. It is important to note that this working landscape footprint and contribution is not an accident. In the 1950s and 1960s, there were plans for more than 40,000 housing units in west Marin. Through purposeful decision making on the part of Marin County, the conservation role of Marin Agricultural Land Trust, and education on diversified agriculture, the role Marin's farmers and ranchers have to contribute as partners in stewarding of the landscape and securing a viable local economy has been possible. This includes strategic planning by the agricultural community in two successive Agricultural Summits (1997 and 2010) to identify obstacles and barriers to farm

and ranch success and build solutions and programs to overcome these. These Summits were and are critical for coordinating between the multiple agricultural support organizations and are a good place for MCL and the it's Agricultural Land Use Committee to learn about the needs and directions of Marin's farmers and ranchers.

C. NPS Ranch Management Plan Update.

Melanie Gunn reported the Park Service has received about 6,000 comments during the scoping period for the management plan and the staff is now analyzing these. A summary report should be available in August and then work will begin on the next phase. They hope to complete the planning process by fall of 2015. The next opportunity for public participation will be during workshops this fall on alternatives, regarding elk management and other areas of focus. Park Service personnel had a two-day meeting in June with California Fish and Wildlife and other ungulate management agencies, as part of the scoping, and will present some of the ideas that came out of that meeting.

Melanie said that testing for Johnes disease is being conducted for the Limantour and pastoral zone/D Ranch herds on a rotational basis. The results of the tests of 16 elk in the D Ranch herd were negative.

D. Elk Management/Interim Measures.

In response to a question from Priscilla Bull, Melanie reported briefly on Park Service actions to mitigate the elk problem while the management planning is underway. She said 1) the Service has an ongoing fence rebuilding effort but not all ranchers want the NPS to assist with repairing fences. 2) the Service is looking at potential relocation of elk, 3) they also have heard from members of the public who want to keep the elk (at Pt. Reyes), 4) they have provided water troughs in an area of D Ranch to encourage the elk to come there (as the elk presumably wander in part to look for water), 5) the Tomales/Pt Reyes herd population decreased during the drought due to natural attrition when water is less available, 6) the management plan will "give us a way to move forward" but that is not to say now that the elk will stay or leave the pastoral zone.

[Melanie emailed a follow-up response to questions about the timeline for Johnes disease testing and whether there had been complaints from the Humane Society regarding the population decline in the Tomales Bay Herd.]

E. Other Business.

Sally asked that people let her know if there are topics on which they would like to have presentations at a committee meeting.

The next regular meeting of this committee will be Friday, October 25, from 9 to 11 in the Farm Bureau Office in West Marin.

F. Meeting adjourned at 11:15 a.m.

Notes: Thomas/Gale/Teichman