CHAPTER 3. LANDSCAPE DISTURBANCES

Invasive Plant Species – North Fork Valley

Invasive plant species have been identified as one of the great issues facing the Forest Service today (USDA Forest Service 2003). Invasive plant species are both native and non-native species that can cause economic or environmental harm, or harm to human health. Many species are also considered to be noxious weeds. The State of Colorado (Colorado Revised Statutes 35: Article 5.5, Section 35-5.5-103. (16)) defines noxious weeds as: an alien plant or parts of an alien plant that have been designated as being noxious by a local advisory board, and meets one or more of the following criteria:

(a) aggressively invades or is detrimental to economic crops or native plant communities;
(b) is poisonous to livestock;
(c) is a carrier of detrimental insects, diseases or parasites;
(d) the direct or indirect effect of the presence of this plant is detrimental to the environmentally sound management of natural or agricultural ecosystems.

Invasive plant species generally are species that have been introduced into ecosystems in which they did not evolve, and consequently, tend to have no natural enemies to limit their reproduction and expansion. They also tend to be more vigorous, taller, and more productive than native species (Mitchell 2000). As a result they can out-compete and displace native plant species, often completely taking over a site.

Invasive plant species have the potential to cause serious ecological and economic harm. Natural plant community composition can be altered, greatly reducing biodiversity and eliminating habitat and forage for wildlife and livestock. Ecosystem functions such as nutrient cycling and energy flow can be altered. Invasive plants can change soil textures by reducing soil moisture holding capacity or lowering water tables. Soils can become more unstable and surface runoff and sediment yield can be increased (Miller 2000). The presence of invasive plant species can also alter fire regimes.

Human activities that disturb native plant communities can create suitable habitat for invasive plant species. Invasive plant species can be spread or introduced into unoccupied areas by vehicles, humans, and animals along travel routes and waterways.

Invasive plant species infestations are increasing exponentially through the western United States, and this trend is also occurring within the North Fork Valley Geographic Area. The Forest Plan Revision process must evaluate any risks to ecological sustainability and provide direction to reduce the threats of invasive species.

Known Occurrences of Invasive Plant Species

The State of Colorado, local counties (Delta, Montrose, Gunnison), and the GMUG National Forest have all identified invasive plant species of concern. (Complete list is in administrative record.)

Efforts to map and monitor known infestations of invasive plant species are ongoing. Data is available through a state-wide effort to map invasive plants by the quarters of 7.5 min topographic quadrangles (State Quarter Quad Mapping 2002). Invasive species mapping on NFS lands identify more precise locations. Current inventories do not include all known infestations.

Twenty-three species have been inventoried on the North Fork Valley Geographic Area. Table 1 lists these species and the affected acres for the entire Geographic Area and just the NFS lands. These acreage figures do not reflect the density of plant infestations at any given site, due to the different data sources. Infestation densities vary from less than 10 percent to 100 percent cover within the affected acres.

Table 1. Gross Acres Affected by Invasive Plant Species, North Fork Valley Geographic Area

Species	Acres on Geographic Area	Acres on NFS
Scentless Chamomile (*Anthemis arvensis*)	4	4
Common burdock (*Arctium minus)*	325	180
Cheat Grass (Downy Brome) (*Bromus tectorum)*	2,175	850
Plumeless thistle (*Carduus acanthoides)*	3	3
Hoary cress (Whitetop) (*Cardaria draba)*	397	175
Musk thistle (*Carduus nutans L.)*	44	21
Diffuse knapweed (*Centaurea diffusa*)	28	22
Spotted knapweed (*Centaurea maculosa*)	2	1
Russian knapweed (*Centaurea repens)*	3,228	291
Oxeye daisy (*Chrysanthemum leucanthemum)*	505	503
Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense)*	63	58
Bull thistle (*Cirsium vulgare)*	46	20
Field bindweed (*Convolvulus arvensis)*	10	4
Houndstongue (*Cynoglossum officinale)*	30	28
Russian olive (*Elaeagnus angustifolia)*	108	13
Leafy spurge (*Euphorbia esula)*	12	11
Dame's rocket (*Hesperis matronalis)*	3	3
Perennial pepperweed (*Lepidium latifolium)*	8	6
Yellow toadflax (*Linaria vulgaris)*	246	245
Scotch thistle((*Onopordum acanthium)*	29	25
Tansy ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*)	1	1
Saltcedar (Tamarisk) (*Tamarix ramosissima)*	292	22

Figure 1 displays the current inventory of invasive plant species locations on the NFS portion of the geographic area. Figures 2 through 7 display the current inventory of invasive plant species locations in the Geographic Area from the State quarter quad inventory data (2002). Invasive plant species shown on these figures are grouped by knapweeds, thistles, ornamentals, agricultural weeds, riparian species and other noxious species. Acres of infestations associated with quarter quads that overlap NFS land are included in the NFS acres totals, above.

The largest extents of invasive plant species occur below NFS lands. On NFS lands, concentration areas for invasive plant species are associated with most of the major road corridors in the following areas: Stevens Gulch, Mule Park, West Muddy, Kebler Pass, Coal Creek, access to Minnesota and Lone Cabin Reservoirs, Saddle Mountain and Black Mesa.

On NFS lands within the Geographic Area, oxeye daisy and yellow toadflax are of the greatest concern. The Coal Creek watershed has been identified as a weed management area by Gunnison County because of yellow toadflax infestations found there, many of which occur in the West Elk Wilderness. Concentrations can also be found along Kebler pass and up Anthracite Creek in the Raggeds Wilderness. Concentrations of oxeye daisy are found along the Stevens Gulch road to Mule Park and the West Muddy area. Both oxeye daisy and yellow toadflax occur in higher elevations on more productive sites found in aspen intermixed with meadows. Both of these species were originally introduced as ornamentals on private land. Canada thistle occurs throughout the North Fork Geographic Area. This species occurs in most cover types found in the Geographic Area.

The majority of inventoried infestations shown on Figure 1 occur along roads. Roads are one of the major pathways upon which invasive plant species are transported; however, roads also serve as the primary survey routes. Additional concentrations shown on Figure 1 are within specific project areas (i.e., Last Chance timber sale). As mentioned above, not all parts of the Uncompahgre Plateau Geographic area have been inventoried for invasive plant species.

Roads are also the primary survey routes for inventories included in the State's quarter quad inventory. Infestations indicated by a shaded quarter quad on Figures 2 through 7 are likely located along roads or trails within that shaded area.

Figure 1. Forest Service Inventory of Invasive Plant Species, North Fork Valley Geographic Area

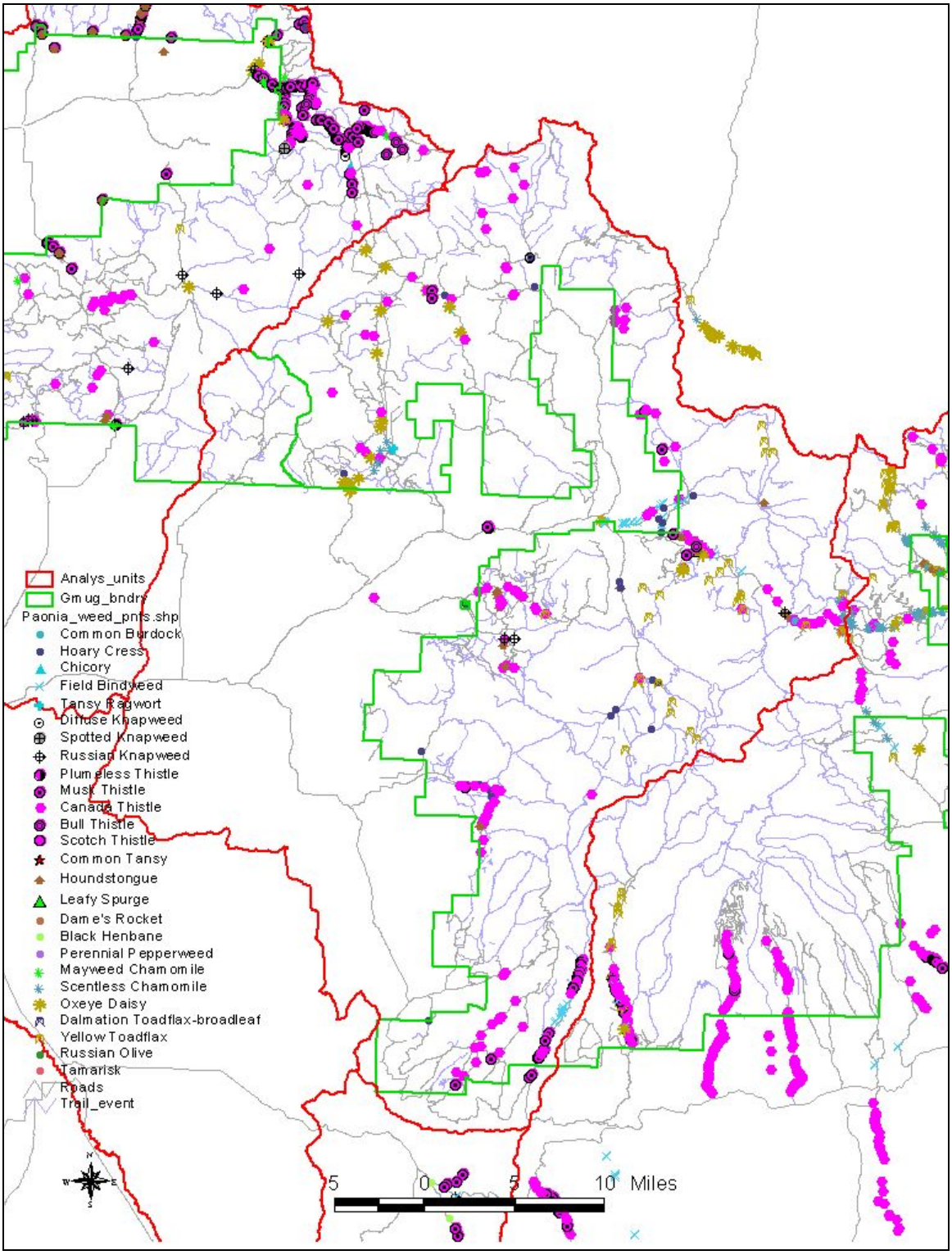


Figure 2. Knapweed Species

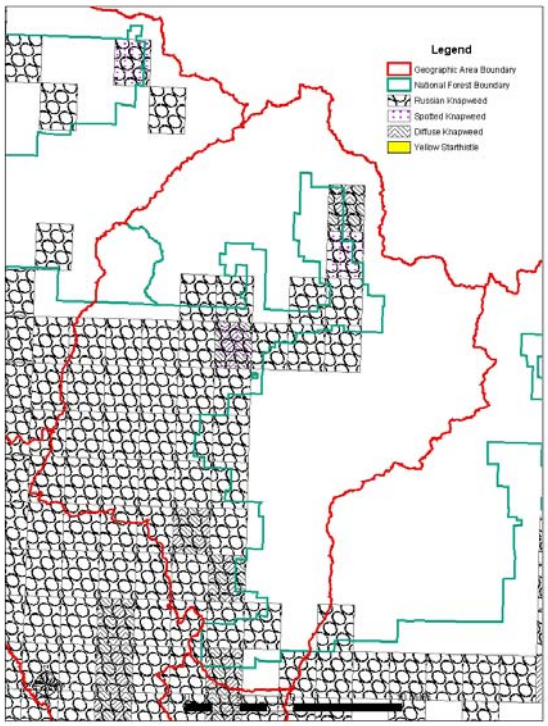


Figure 3. Thistle Species

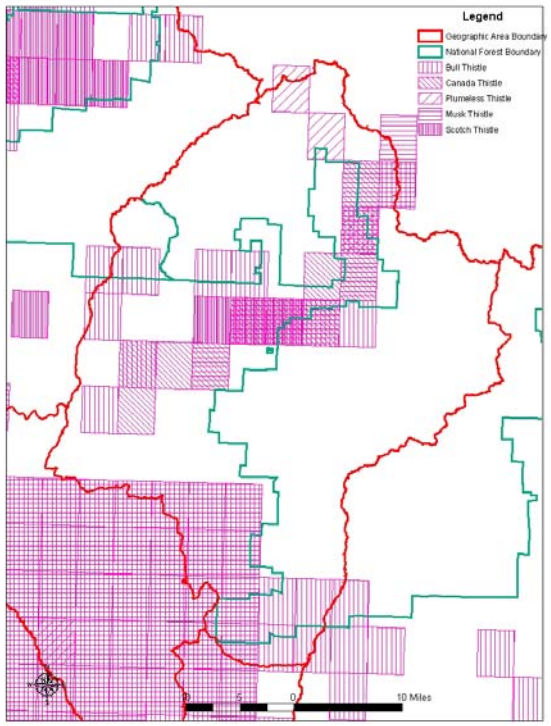


Figure 4. Ornamental Species

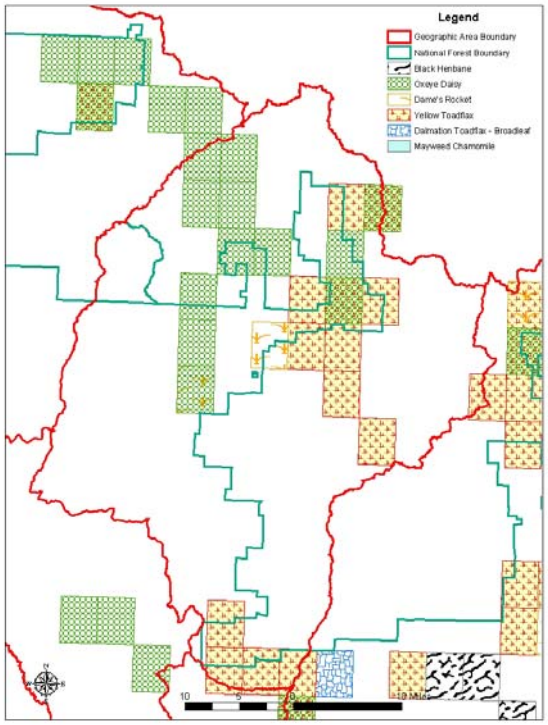


Figure 5. Agricultural Species

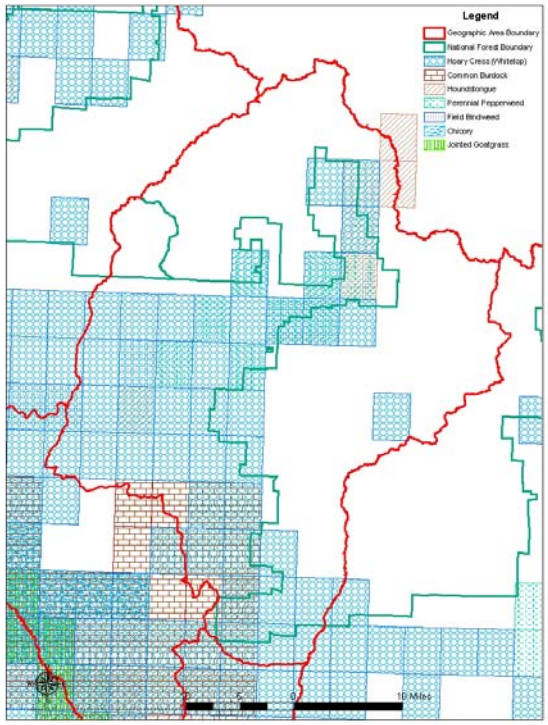


Figure 6. Riparian Species

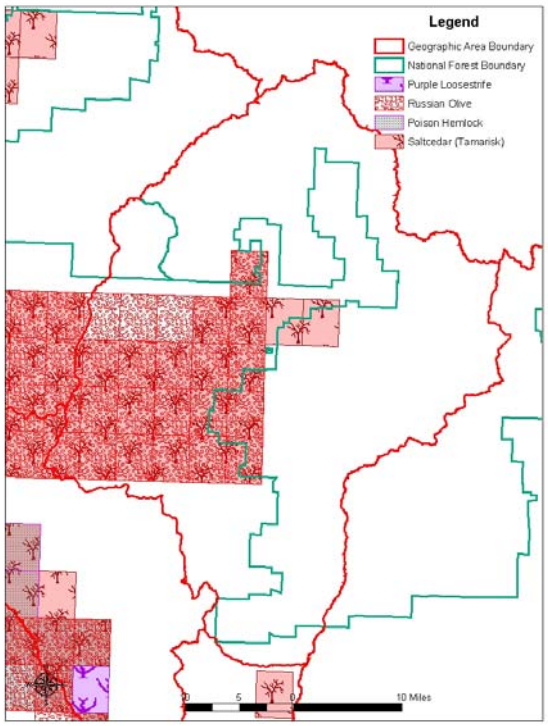
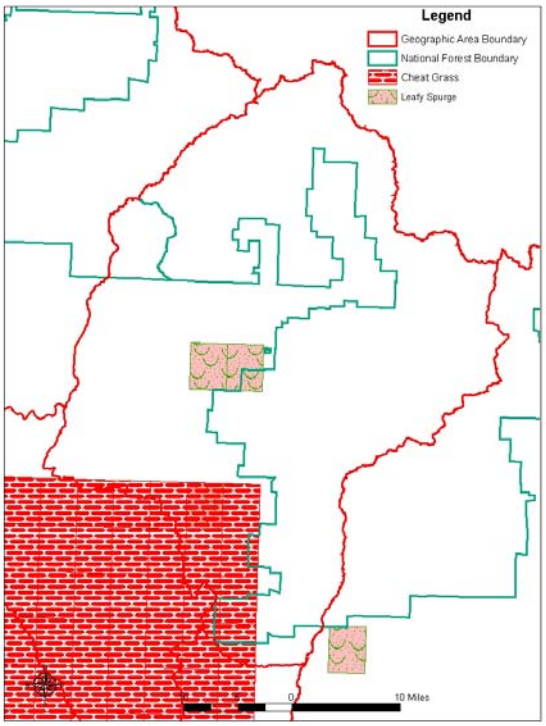


Figure 7. Other Noxious Species



Invasibility Risk

Areas where vegetative cover is disturbed and bare soil becomes exposed are most susceptible to noxious weed invasions. Land areas can be disturbed as a result of human land uses/management (i.e., roads, trails, ditches, agriculture, livestock grazing, timber harvest, prescribed burning, and land clearance) or natural disturbances (i.e., wildfires, wildlife concentration areas).

Physical factors of a site, such as available moisture, sunlight and warm temperatures (Stohlgren as cited in Regan et al. 2003), also influence the potential for invasive species to become established. Most invasive plant species require large amounts of sunlight, warm temperatures and relatively long growing seasons. In arid western environments like the Uncompahgre Plateau, riparian and wetland areas are susceptible because of the available water.

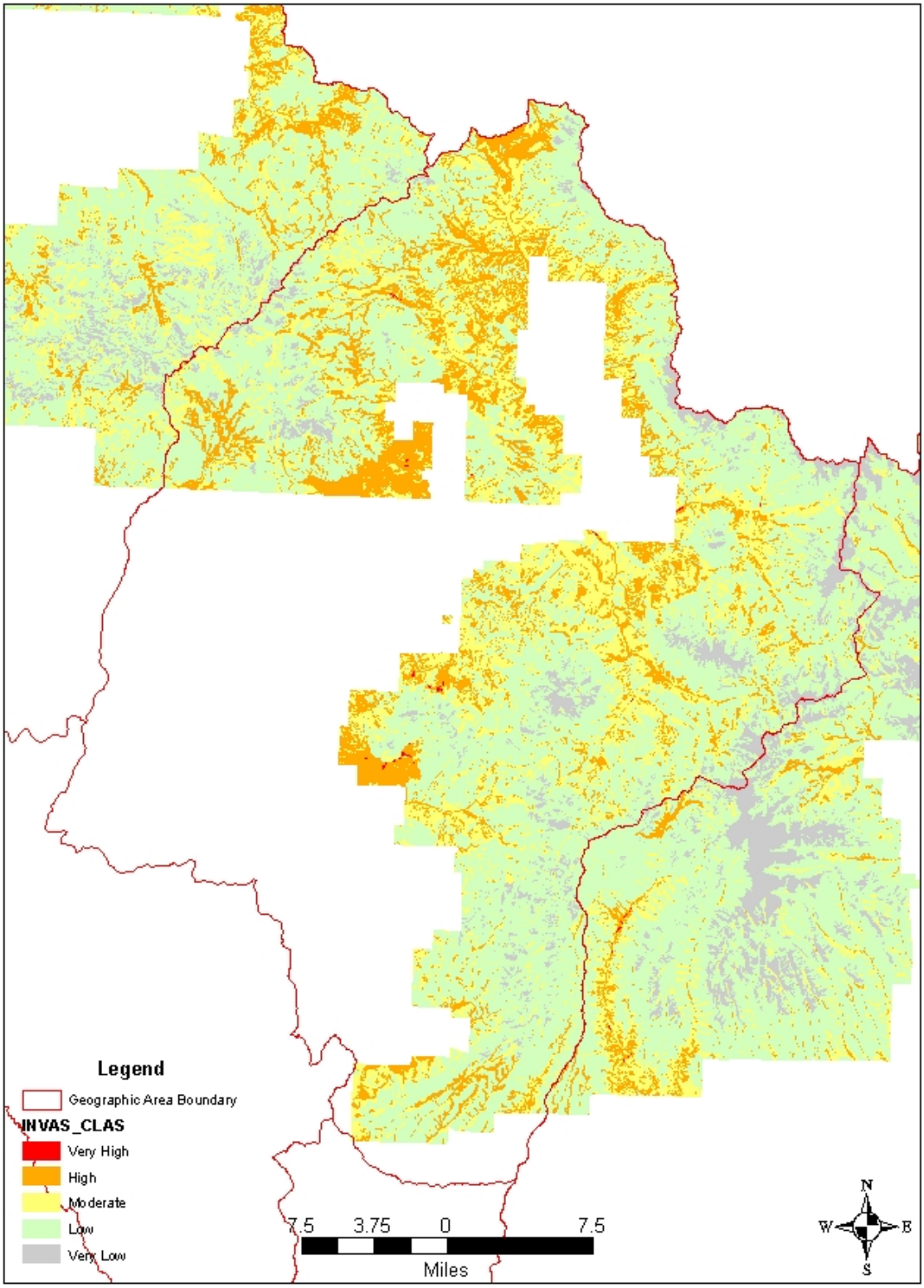
A GIS based modeling effort was used to identify those areas that have the highest risk for invasive plant species. Slope, aspect, elevation and canopy cover were used to assign invasibility risk. For example; areas of highest risk are below 8,500 feet in elevation, in areas with canopy closure less than 20 percent and in riparian or valley bottom locations. The results of this invasibility risk modeling for the North Fork Valley Geographic Area are summarized in Table 2, and displayed in Figure 8.

Table 2. Acres of Invasibility Risk Ratings, NFS Portion of North Fork Valley Geographic Area

Invasibility Risk Rating	Acres	Percent	Dominant Cover types
Very High	300	0	Bare, grass-forb
High	84,900	17	Aspen, oak-mtn. shrub
Moderate	117,900	23	Aspen, oak-mtn. shrub
Low	276,200	55	Aspen, spruce-fir
Very Low	25,100	5	Bare, spruce-fir

Approximately 40 percent of the NFS portion of this Geographic Area has moderate or high risk. These areas are in the lower elevations or along major drainages. Approximately 60 percent of the NFS portion of the Geographic Area has low or very low risk for invasive plants. These areas are higher elevations much of which is bare, above treeline, and located in Wilderness areas.

Figure 8. Invasibility Risk Ratings, North Fork Valley Geographic Area



Invasive Plant Species Management

Numerous federal and State laws, as well as Forest Service policy and direction guide management of invasive species. The current Forest Plan has very limited direction related to invasive plant species. To address these limitations the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests Noxious Weeds Strategy was prepared in 1994. Since 1994 additional federal and State laws and strategies have been developed. Management efforts have been modified as new direction was enacted. The revised Forest Plan needs to incorporate the latest direction concerning invasive plant species management.

Management efforts for invasive plant species in the North Fork Valley Geographic Area are done through cooperative agreements involving Gunnison, Delta and Montrose counties, Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, Colorado Division of Wildlife, Colorado Department of Transportation, and local municipalities. Federal, State and local funds are combined to cover inventory and treatment efforts. On NFS lands mitigation measures designed to prevent the risk of weed introduction and/or spread are included in project designs for any ground disturbing activities, such as timber sales, utility corridors, road and trail construction and maintenance. In addition, Gunnison County has a revegetation program that requires a reclamation permit if more than 2,000 square feet will be disturbed. A bond is required if more than 10,000 square feet will be disturbed. Landowners have two years to complete revegetation and each property is inspected.

Key Findings

- Russian knapweed and cheat grass affect the largest areas in the North Fork Valley, with most of the infestations occurring below the Forest on private and BLM-managed lands.
- The species affecting the largest area of NFS lands include cheat grass, oxeye daisy, Russian knapweed and yellow toadflax. The oxeye daisy and yellow toadflax infestations are almost exclusively found on NFS lands in the North Fork Valley Geographic Area.
- The Coal Creek watershed has been designated as a weed management area because of concentrations of yellow toadflax.
- Russian knapweed and hoary cress occur across the largest extent of the entire Geographic Area. These species are extremely hard to control once they become established.
- Tamarisk and Russian olive are the most common invasive plant species that occurs in streamside riparian areas. These riparian species can completely replace cottonwood and other native riparian species.
- Current inventories do not include all known infestations. Inventories have occurred along transportation routes. Invasive plant species locations shown on maps are localized along transportation routes.
- Approximately 40 percent of the NFS portion of this Geographic Area has moderate or high risk and 60 percent has low or very low risk for invasive plants.

Trends

- Invasive species infestations are rapidly increasing in the Geographic Area. The largest areas affected are off NFS lands. Activities in areas that have higher invasibility risks (elevations below 8,500 feet) are increasing in number and size (i.e., clearing and development on private land, road construction).

- Current vegetation conditions have resulted in recent fires that have burned with high intensities over large areas (i.e., Wake fire). These trends are expected to continue. The potential for future fire disturbances is high (see Fire Management section). If additional areas are disturbed, the potential for invasive species to infest additional areas is also high.

- Inventory work to identify invasive species infestations has been elevated as a management emphasis. Coordinated efforts with county and other local partners have been increasing to treat new infestations as they are located. Budget constraints limit what work can be accomplished.

Management Implications

- The revised Forest Plan needs to incorporate direction from local, state and national strategies to treat existing invasive plant infestations and prevent the spread or establishment of new infestations. All the ongoing coordination efforts need to be recognized in the revised Forest Plan. The revised Forest Plan also needs to put monitoring requirements in place that will track acres affected by invasive plant species, evaluate treatment success to reduce and/or eradicate invasive plant species infestations, evaluate effectiveness of standards and/or mitigation measures designed to prevent establishment or spread of invasive plant species, and track trends in acres at risk from invasive plant species.

- Projects designed to reduce fuels in wildland urban interface areas or in vegetation types that are more prone to frequent fires have also become management priorities, under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act and the regional Accelerated Watershed/Vegetation Restoration Program. Many of these projects have the potential to disturb areas, which would make them more suitable for invasive plant species. Projects must be carefully designed, implemented and monitored to ensure that fuels problems are not replaced with invasive plant species.

- Rehabilitation efforts following natural disturbances must include management efforts designed to prevent the introduction and spread of invasive plant species.

- Budget constraints for all cooperators involved in invasive species management will continue to limit the amount of work that can be done to control the spread of invasive plant species.

Reference

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