

# California invasive weed problem could grow with budget cuts

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

It doesn't take a botanist or even a nature nut to identify yellow star thistle along a favorite hiking trail. Every outdoor enthusiast has felt the familiar stab of introduction.

The invasive weed can reach 6 feet high with stiff limbs that seem to sprout daggers from every pore. Each arm is topped with a crown of inch-long spikes – and one showy yellow flower – that seem perfectly placed to stab a shoulder or poke an eye.

Yellow star thistle is public enemy No. 1 in the California weed world, found in every county but one and covering as much as 14 million acres. It is blamed for altering native landscapes, turning meadows into deserts and even killing horses, which are uniquely vulnerable to a toxin in the plant's leaves.

"Yellow star thistle is kind of like the state weed," said Doug Johnson, executive director of the California Invasive Plant Council, a nonprofit research group. "There's tons of it."

A coordinated effort across 14 counties has made strides in recent years to keep star thistle out of the Sierra Nevada, one of the few California regions the weed has not yet penetrated entirely. But now star thistle appears poised to win that battle, too, with a powerful ally on its side: state budget cuts.

The Star Thistle Leading Edge Project was funded by the state

Department of Food and Agriculture as part of its weed control budget totaling \$2.7 million in 2011. The money funded county weed management agencies statewide, as well as coordination among Sierra counties from Plumas to Kern, which jointly drew a line at about the 4,000-foot elevation mark to combat star thistle.

All that money was cut from the 2011-2012 state budget cycle.

Over the past year, the Leading Edge Project cobbled together local and federal dollars, including grants from the U.S. Forest Service. But that money runs out next month. The project sought a \$314,000 grant from the Sierra Nevada Conservancy to continue the work for four years. But it learned Thursday the grant will not be funded because the group failed to meet the application requirements.

The result? Weed experts say yellow star thistle could begin to crowd out native plants in the Sierra, becoming a common sight – and literally a thorn in the side – for hikers, cattle ranchers and other nature lovers who enjoy the mountains as they are, free of this prickly nuisance.

“Walking through it is totally miserable. It’s a terrible plant,” said Garrett Dickman, a botanist and biologist at Yosemite National Park. “I deal with quite a variety of nonnative plants, and I try to be professional about them. But I personally dislike yellow star thistle. I’ve been jabbed by it so many times. It’s a really easy plant to hate.”

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