

Updated noxious weed bill draws wide support

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BOISE – An update to Idaho's noxious weed laws that includes targeting "aquatic noxious weeds" such as Eurasian milfoil won unanimous support from the House Agricultural Affairs Committee on Wednesday.

Rep. Eric Anderson, R-Priest Lake, described Eurasian milfoil as "a very, very noxious seaweed that we have invading our state." The plant already covers 4,048 surface acres of Idaho waters, Anderson told the committee. If not checked, it could cover up to 250,000 acres in a few years, he said.

The measure, House Bill 594, drew support from the state Department of Agriculture, three county weed superintendents, three farm groups and others. No one testified against it.

"This is very important to the counties," Valley County Commissioner Tom Kerr told lawmakers. "We have ... the duty and the responsibility to enforce the weed laws," but lack the appropriate mechanism, he said.

In Valley County's case, the weed problem includes milfoil in scenic Payette Lake.

"We've taken over 105,000 pounds of milfoil out of Payette Lake," Kerr told the committee.

Roger Batt, executive director of the Idaho-Oregon Seed Association and the Idaho Mint Growers Association, said, "Noxious weeds are a very real and serious threat to Idaho." The bill, he said, "allows for more tools ... in the weed management toolbox."

In addition to adding aquatic noxious weeds to the program, the bill updates definitions, includes references to new ways of fighting the weeds such as "bio-controls" and increases penalties for noncompliance.

Jim Martell, Canyon County noxious weed superintendent, said in his county, a type of beetle is eating up noxious purple loosestrife that grows along rivers – an example of the new "bio-controls."

Dan Larkin of Food Producers of Idaho told the panel, "Idaho agriculture is dependent on strong noxious weed laws that protect agriculture in our state."

Anderson, who has been pushing for more attention to the milfoil problem and is working on finding funding to eradicate the weed, which has a particularly large infestation in Lake Pend Oreille, jokingly introduced himself to the committee as "Morty Milfoil."

The bill now moves to the full House.