

Arundo Battle Plans Being Drawn

By David Chang, Santa Barbara County Agricultural Commissioners Office

Arundo donax is the enemy and Carpinteria Creek is the battleground. *Arundo donax*, also known as giant reed, “the weed from hell,” or simply, arundo, is a grassy, bamboo-like weed that can grow up to 30 feet tall and as fast as four inches a day. Its fast and aggressive growth is its strength. Fire and flooding are its weapons.

Biologists for the California Department of Fish & Game believe that Carpinteria Creek offers the best opportunity among all South Coast urban streams for restoring significant steelhead runs in the next few years.

The Carpinteria Creek Watershed Coalition, a broad-based partnership of landowners, resource agencies, and nonprofit and other local organizations, is working to enhance the Carpinteria Creek for steelhead recovery. Part of the multi-pronged strategy includes the removal of non-native vegetation that is choking the creek. Battle plans to remove arundo are being drawn up by David Chang, coordinator of the Santa Barbara County Weed Management Area. The area will be applying for grant funds from the Adaptive Watershed Improvement Program and hope to begin a project in the fall of 2004.

Curtis Vincent, wildland fire specialist for the Montecito Fire District, warns, "Fire is a big problem with arundo. Where once a creek or riparian corridor would impede the spread of fire, with an arundo infestation it becomes extremely flammable."

Arundo causes problems for wildlife too. It spreads when sections of the stem or root break off and float downstream. Eventually, the pieces take root and the colonies merge into a single, large impenetrable infestation.

Arundo stems and leaves contain a wide array of noxious chemicals, including silica, cardiac glycosides, and curare-mimicking indoles, which protect it from most native insects and other grazers. “It provides almost no habitat value for native species that live in the creek. Arundo displaces the native plants that animals use for food and nesting,” stated Matt Roberts, Director of Parks and Recreation for the City of Carpinteria.

Flooding is also a problem. A bridge in Riverside County was destroyed when the Santa Ana River pushed against errant arundo stalks that had piled up against the bridge supports. Maureen Spencer, environmental specialist for the Santa Barbara County Flood Control District, added, "In some drainages, arundo grows so thick it lays over in the creek and obstructs the flow, increasing the risk of flooding."

Eliminating arundo from local watersheds won't be an easy battle. Mowing or cutting alone will not control arundo. Digging out large stands is difficult and creates erosion problems. The weed management area expects to utilize the youthful vigor of crews from the California Conservation Corps to cut the arundo down and then apply small amounts of herbicide directly to the remaining stumps. This cut-stump method helps reduce the amount of herbicide that gets into the environment, as there is very little off-site contamination.

The goal for removal of arundo is to enhance the creek for wildlife, including steelhead, and reduce the risk of fire and flooding. The weed management area hopes that residents along the creek will allow the project to remove arundo from their property. Cooperation from the creek's neighbors will be crucial to the success of this project.

Photo Caption: A California Conservation Corps team battles an arundo stand in Hidden Valley Park. Cutting combined with minimal chemical use is the most effective way to control this pernicious weed.