

AmeriCorps crews battle noxious weeds



Along the Root River in Fillmore and Houston counties, crews work with SWCDs, Minnesota Department of Agriculture to ID, treat two invasives threatening habitat: Japanese hops and poison hemlock



PRESTON — The Fillmore Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) is battling two non-native weeds that threaten the Root River. Japanese hops and poison hemlock, both on Minnesota’s Noxious Weeds List, choke out native species that shade streams and stabilize their banks — putting cold-and-clear-water trout habitat at risk.

For the fourth consecutive season, a Conservation Corps Minnesota & Iowa (CCMI) crew this summer located pockets of the weeds in Fillmore and Houston counties and treated them with herbicide. By mid-August, the two- to three-person crew had worked 456 of the 800 hours allotted.

Work is planned through late October.

The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources’ (BWSR) annual appropriation of \$500,000 in Clean Water Funds pays for AmeriCorps crews’ labor costs. Local government units submit applications for work projects, and often provide matching funds. For the past two years, crews have continued the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and Department of Agriculture’s noxious weed control work in Fillmore County that dates to 2016.

As new infestations were discovered, the project’s scope grew.

Left: Zach Dieterman, the South District field coordinator for the Rochester-based AmeriCorps crew in August 2018, walked into a spot where a Conservation Corps Minnesota & Iowa crew had treated the banks of the Root River at a public access with herbicide. **Photo Credit:** Ann Wessel, BWSR

Top: Japanese hops are prolific annual vines that can grow up to 35 feet in one season, smothering native vegetation.

Bottom: Poison hemlock is highly toxic; ingesting a few leaves can kill an adult. **Photo Credits:** Minnesota Department of Agriculture

The focus on Japanese hops — discovered during a 2015 river and trail survey — started in parking lots, canoe access points, along the Root River State Trail and within the strip of land between the trail and river. It's since expanded to private land.

Native to Asia, Japanese hops are prolific annual vines. Growing up to 35 feet in one season, they can smother the diverse native vegetation that stabilizes riverbanks, filters runoff and provides wildlife habitat. Japanese hops are easily killed but easily spread.

“The hops will continue to be an ongoing battle just because of the severity of the infestation along the Root River,” said Zach Dieterman. The South District field coordinator for the Rochester-based CCMI crew in August 2018, Dieterman has since taken a job with the DNR. “The Root River is such a desirable and well-used recreational route for kayakers and tubers and people who are using the bike trail. It’s something that we want to keep as a nice natural resource for recreation purposes.”

When Japanese hops die off and go dormant, Dieterman explained during the August 2018 tour of a treated site, they leave bare, erosion-prone riverbanks.

“We’re trying to get it back or maintain the kind of plant biodiversity that makes the Root River and the area unique,” Dieterman said.

Treatment in 2016 seemed



Japanese hops are easily killed but easily spread. When they smother riverbanks' native vegetation, they eliminate those plants that help to filter runoff, stabilize the banks and provide wildlife habitat. The vines also can trip anglers and others. Photo Credit: Minnesota Department of Agriculture

to control the populations. Off-river and trailside work showed positive results, but high water in 2017 made riverside treatment too dangerous. This spring’s high water and flooding likely moved weed seeds farther downriver.

In an August news release, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) solicited help in reporting new finds and controlling Japanese hops. Infestations have been confirmed along the Root River from Preston to the confluence of the Mississippi River.

An MDA grant allowed Fillmore SWCD and Houston County Planning and Zoning to expand treatment this season.

The focus on poison hemlock, a biennial, centered on the Root River near Lanesboro.

Christina Basch, the MDA’s Rochester-based noxious weed eradication specialist,

coordinates AmeriCorps crews’ work and surveys the sites.

“I am worried with these flooding events we’ll see more poison hemlock,” Basch said earlier this season.

As of mid-August, Basch said it appeared as if containment efforts were having an effect. Only a few new locations had been discovered. The MDA and DNR have seen a dent in poison hemlock populations where it has been treated.

During on-river treatment assessments of both weeds from Preston to Houston in mid-August, Basch said MDA and CCMI workers saw patchy but dense Japanese hops infestations. The effect of on-river treatments was noticeable, but large patches remained. Japanese



Basch

How to report a suspected infestation

Report a suspected noxious weed infestation to the Minnesota Department of Agriculture’s Arrest the Pest at 888-545-6684 or arrest.the.pest@state.mn.us.

hops didn’t appear in areas eroded by spring floods, but treatment was advised over the next few years. Treated poison hemlock sites showed no seed production. The crew observed two new poison hemlock sites.

Seeds of both invasive weeds are easily transported via animals, footwear or equipment. Partners have educated anglers and recreational trail users through posters and workshops.

“With hops, since it does create those dense mats, it can get almost like a snare where if people walk through it they can get trapped,” Basch said. Poison hemlock is highly toxic; ingesting even a few leaves can kill an adult.

The SWCD, MDA and DNR are among those tackling invasive species in southeastern Minnesota before eradication becomes impossible or control becomes too expensive.

Other partners have included the Minnesota Department of Transportation, University of Minnesota Extension, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Trout Unlimited, counties and county agricultural inspectors.

