



SHAUN STANLEY/Durango Herald

Nicole Blair, left, and Hannah Madden, both with the Southwest Conservation Corps, remove a freshly cut Russian olive from the property of Ed Zink.

# Fighting Russian invaders

## Project to remove Russian Olives begins

BY JONATHAN ROMEO  
HERALD STAFF WRITER

What was once distributed freely for ornamental landscaping is now the target of an aggressive three-year project that aims to remove the Russian olive plant – a pesky invasive species that chokes out native trees – from the Animas Valley.

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“People thought they were great: They grow fast, they smell good,” said Animas Valley resident Ed Zink. “But now we know better.”



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See **RUSSIAN, 8A** A car headed south on U.S. Highway 550 north of Durango passes a line of Russian olives.





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Property owner Ed Zink, right, hands a freshly cut Russian olive to Hannah Madden with the Southwest Conservation Corps on Wednesday as part of a project by the Mountain Studies Institute. Amanda Kuenzi, community service director with Mountain Studies Institute, watches.

## Russian: 'They just took over our field'

Continued from 1A

Zink, 69, said when he grew up in the Animas Valley, north of Durango, there were no Russian Olive plants to be found. However, in the 1970s and 1980s the trees were introduced to the area by the federal government for their decorative merits.

Soon, residents along the valley discovered the drawbacks of the non-native plant, which swallows up nearly 75 gallons of water a day per tree. The narrow plant, with silvery leaves and olive-shaped fruit, quickly pushed out cottonwoods, willows and other trees along the Animas River corridor.

"They just took over our field," said Zink, who owns about 150-acres of farmland. "We couldn't grow hay, the grass greatly decreased. They're really a tree that's a weed."

Zink, along with some other private property

owners who had placed their land under a conservation easement. There remained the need to address other landowners in the valley, Mountain Studies Institute's Amanda M. Kuenzi said.

As a result, MSI applied, and was awarded, a \$195,000 grant from the Colorado Water Conservation Board and an additional \$52,000 from Colorado Parks and Wildlife for a three-year project to remove invasive plants from Bakers Bridge to the New Mexico line.

This week, crews from Southwest Conservation Corps embarked on the first leg of the project: a three-week effort on about 15 properties in the Animas Valley, including James Ranch and the Zink farm.

This fall's removal, Kuenzi said, also serves as a pilot project aimed to garner interest from adjacent landowners.

"We really hope to get property owners who

has strategically fought Russian olive and other non-native plants on its property for years.

"We still have an ongoing monitoring situation, but we really don't have many remaining on city property," she said. "But certainly, we really advocate for collaborative effort to remove these species just because they are so invasive."

Megan Graham, spokeswoman for La Plata County, said Russian olive is not on the list of weeds the county targets, but that the issue may be a topic of conversation later this month.

Russian olives are considered a "List B noxious weed," which requires local governments to manage and limit their spread under Colorado state law.

Regardless, work carried out this week by Southwest Conservation Corp's eight-person crew aims to cut down the plant. They then drop



quickly pushed out cottonwoods, willows and other trees along the Animas River corridor.

"They just took over our field," said Zink, who owns about 150-acres of farmland. "We couldn't grow hay, the grass greatly decreased. They're really a tree that's a weed."

Zink, along with some other private property owners, have over the years taken it upon themselves to fund removal efforts. For his part, Zink said he's removed 300 to 500 trees a year for 10 years.

But the effort is all for naught, Zink said, if the corridor as a whole doesn't fight the takeover of the Russian olive, which is easily spread through its seedlings and also carried by birds.

Two years ago, a partnership between La Plata County Open Space and Southwest Conversation Corps removed Russian Olive, along with two other invasive species - tamarisk and Siberian elm - from more than 300 acres of the Animas River valley.

However, lands targeted during that project focused only on property

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This fall's removal, Kuenzi said, also serves as a pilot project aimed to garner interest from adjacent landowners.

"We really hope to get property owners who haven't been involved to get aggressive on this," Kuenzi said.

Kuenzi said because of diligent past efforts from Animas Valley landowners, as well as the city of Durango, among other entities, the presence of Russian olive and other invasive species isn't nearly as problematic as in neighboring communities.

"If you go to Farmington, the Russian olive is wall to wall," she said.

"But we've worked on the problem here for decades, and that's why our area isn't overwhelmed. Still, we need to nip this problem in the bud so future generations don't have to deal with it."

Indeed, Cathy Metz, parks and recreation manager with the city of Durango, said the city

Russian olives are considered a "List B noxious weed," which requires local governments to manage and limit their spread under Colorado state law.

Regardless, work carried out this week by Southwest Conservation Corp's eight-person crew aims to cut down the plant. They then drop riparian-safe herbicide on the root so the plant doesn't grow back.

"The hard part is really trying to spot all of them," crew leader Alyssa Engdahl said while scouring the Zink property Wednesday. "And, of course, the thorns."

The project next year will be four months, with the aim of extending into the Florida River watershed, a tributary of the Animas. The effort as a whole, Kuenzi said, largely depends on the community's response.

"We really need all landowners' participation to make this program a success and to ensure the health of our watershed for years to come," she said.

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### CASH 5

Monday's numbers:

1 2 11 12 19

Next drawing: Today

### LOTTO

Saturday's numbers:

9 15 18 19 21 31

Next drawing: Wednesday

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

Monday's numbers: LB

6 23 31 34 45 4

Next drawing: Thursday

### POWERBALL

Saturday's numbers:

23 49 57 64 74 20 2

Next drawing: Wednesday

### MEGA MILLIONS

Friday's numbers:

7 27 60 64 74 5 3

Next drawing: Today

### PICK 3

Monday's numbers:

1 4 3

Next drawing: Today

Housewares • Fitness  
Jewelry • Clothing  
Spas • Massage