

Volunteers, beetles go after invasive plants

By David Riley/Daily News staff

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With more than 100 volunteers trained and 36,000 loosestrife-chomping beetles released, a regional group fighting invasive plants is looking toward the next step in its battle.

The coalition of environmental groups, government agencies and town officials reviewed its first year of work this week and has released a five-year plan for the future.

The collaborative will focus some of its efforts on several spots in MetroWest along the Sudbury and Assabet rivers.

"We took the whole watershed, and we basically prioritized areas," said Amber Carr, an invasive plant technician at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Carr coordinates the Sudbury-Assabet-Concord Cooperative Invasive Species Management Area, which formed in May 2009 and since then has grown from 23 members to 32.

The group aims to prevent and control non-native vegetation that crowds out local plants and animals and disrupts the natural landscape in a 36-town area in the Sudbury, Assabet and Concord river watershed.

Since last year, the group said it has gotten several important projects under way. Members have raised thousands of plant-eating beetles, which were released in Wayland, Marlborough, Sudbury, Concord and Lincoln to combat the spread of purple loosestrife, an invasive flowering plant found throughout the region.

The New England Wildflower Society, based in Framingham, said it has trained more than 100 volunteers from 23 towns in the watershed to identify and spot invasive plants. Volunteers have surveyed 92 sites so far.

They worked in August and September to remove Japanese stiltgrass in Framingham at the Sudbury Valley Trustees' Centennial Place Reservation and from a hiking trail on town conservation land, said Ted Elliman, the Flower Society's vegetation management coordinator.

"It has a very shallow root system. In terms of picking it out of the grounds, it's actually very easy," Elliman said. "The problem is that it produces a lot of seed, the seed has a lot of life in the soil, and it spreads prolifically."

The invasive species group also helped fund a volunteer group, the Sudbury Weed Education and Eradication Team, which is working to control invasive plants in town. The coalition is also working to map invasive species in the region and create public education materials.

Going forward, the group is looking at ways to prevent new invasive species from taking root locally and to establish a team that can quickly detect and deal with infestations.

Members also want to promote and coordinate the management of invasive species in the area and to facilitate information sharing and public education on the problem.

Carr said the group has also outlined priority areas. The five-year plan says these areas have important habitats, conservation land or uncommon native animals and plants.

The spots include the Sudbury Reservoir in Framingham and a section of the Assabet National Wildlife

Refuge and Desert Natural Area, which includes land in Sudbury, Marlborough and Hudson.

Also listed are a significant section of the lower Sudbury River and the Cedar Swamp and Whitehall area along the Westborough and Hopkinton line.

Some projects under way will continue. Elliman said the New England Wildflower Society, for example, hopes to train more volunteers for next season.

"We hope to get some high school groups involved in the process," he said. "It would be great if we got some younger people involved."

Other group members include the SUASCO Community Watershed Council, Sudbury Valley Trustees, Mass Audubon, the National Park Service, the Wild and Scenic River Stewardship Council and U.S. Fish and Wildlife.

Also involved are the Southborough Open Land Foundation, the town of Sudbury and the Marlborough Conservation Commission.

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