"B" Rated Weeds

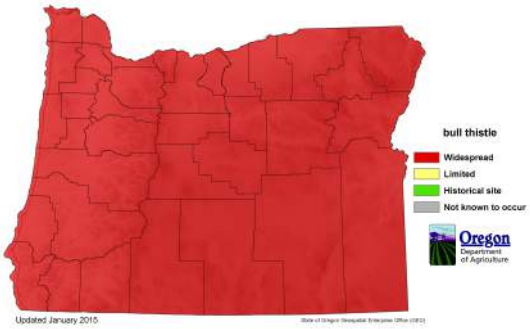
A weed of economic importance which is regionally abundant, but may have limited distribution in some counties

Bull thistle
Cirsium vulgare

Other common names: common thistle, spear thistle, Fuller's thistle

USDA symbol: CIVU
ODA rating: B

Introduction: Bull thistle is a Eurasian native, widely established throughout North America. Accidental introductions have occurred many times through imported seeds and grains. Historically, the plant found limited application for medicinal uses and some parts were deemed edible.



Distribution in Oregon: Bull thistle occurs in every county in Oregon.

Description: Bull thistle is a biennial, blooming July to September and growing 2 to 5 feet tall. The branches sport greenish-brown spines and hairs. Leaves are pinnately lobed, hairy, prickly on the upper side and cottony underneath. Flowers are dark purple, 1½ to 2 inches wide, a clustered at the ends of branches. A circle of plume-like white hairs called pappus tops bull thistle seeds.

Impacts: Considered a nuisance weed in pastures, rangeland and newly logged sites, in the short term it competes with desirable forbs and grasses but will eventually diminish in density and impact. It is easy to control in pastures and agricultural settings with herbicides or mixed species grazing. Homeowners and grub out the large rosette stage with a shovel.

Biological controls: Bull thistle is attacked by several biocontrol insects that were originally intended to target other thistles but the damage levels seldom control individual plants. Observations though indicate that population levels of bull thistle statewide seem to be reduced from historical levels. The most effective insect is the seed head gall fly which prevents seed dispersal.

Oregon Department of Agriculture • Noxious Weed Control Program
635 Capitol Street NE • Salem, OR 97301 * 503-986-4621
www.oregon.gov/ODA/programs/Weeds/Pages/Default.aspx

Photos by Eric Coombs, ODA