



A dry clump of buffelgrass.

Of the many threats to our native plants and animals, the spread of invasive nonnative species is a great concern. When they invade new areas, they can displace native plants and animals as they compete for ground surface, sunlight, moisture, and nutrients. They can cause drastic changes in the landscape and can affect the entire ecosystem. Invasive grasses tend to provide fuel for fires that destroy the natives. This flyer is one in a series,

describing problematic invasive species and telling you what you can do to help save our native desert.

What is buffelgrass?

Buffelgrass is a fairly large, ragged bunchgrass that was introduced to Arizona from Africa for cattle forage. The linear leaves are brown in winter and green in summer, when it produces tan to brown seed heads containing many small bristles. These heads produce large numbers of wind-dispersed seeds, which establish easily on roadsides, vacant lots, alleys, and even in remote parts of the desert. Established buffelgrass forms large and dense colonies that persist and increase.

Why is buffelgrass harmful?

Dense buffelgrass colonies exclude other species and are difficult to eradicate. The plants reduce the space available for our native species and compete with them for scarce water and nutrients.

Dry buffelgrass leaves produce tinder-dry fuels that quickly carry wildfires. Native Sonoran Desert plants do not form continuous stands and do not produce enough fuels to carry wildfires. Because our native cactuses, shrubs, and trees did not evolve with fire, they are seriously damaged by it. Fires that kill native plants create even more space for buffelgrass and other nonnative species that not only survive the fire but thrive on fire.



Drawing: Kim Russek



The scene after an exotic grass-fueled fire.

Threats to Arizona's Native Species: Buffelgrass (*Pennisetum ciliare*)

What is the best way to control buffelgrass?

Because of the severe fire hazard that buffelgrass presents, landowners should attempt to completely remove the plants from their property. Since it spreads by seed; removing seed heads will slow its spread somewhat but the only way to really prevent future seed production and to reduce the threat of wildfire is to remove all buffelgrass plants.

Small plants can easily be pulled up by hand. Larger plants will have to be dug out with a shovel or crowbar. Dispose of the entire plant after removal to make sure eliminate seeds caught in the leaves at the base of the plant do not sprout after the plant is uprooted. Seeds can remain viable in the ground for several years, so check the area periodically for buffelgrass seedlings, which are easy to pull when young.

After removing buffelgrass, consider planting native species in the area so new buffelgrass seedlings will have less room to take root.



Volunteers spend hundreds of hours removing buffelgrass by hand from Tucson Mountain Park and Saguaro National Park.

Photos by A. Segade, and Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum



Buffelgrass has reached the top of “A” Mountain where it has helped fuel fires started by Fourth of July fireworks. It has also reached many more remote areas.

For copies of this and other invasive species leaflets contact:

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Copies of these leaflets may be downloaded from the SDCP site, www.co.pima.az.us/cmo/sdcp/

