

Race to abate arundo in Salinas River is slow-paced

Natalie Jacewicz 4:08 p.m. PDT October 23, 2015



(Photo: *The Salinas Californian*)

A year ago, Paul Robins tromped into an Asian jungle with a small caravan of workers astride elephant-sized mowers. Giant bamboo stalks rose 10 to 20 feet high around them, sometimes collapsing under their own heft to form a lush canopy sturdy enough to support the weight of a full-grown man. The scene evokes Asian postcards, but Robins wasn't in Malaysia, China, or Japan. He was in Greenfield, California. And the plants weren't bamboo — they were the invasive grass arundo.

Arundo donax has strangled the Salinas River for decades, and over time, its grip has grown tighter, hugging 1,500 acres of the river's curves like a long, green python. The plant soaks up water in drought and makes the river more susceptible to El Niño floods, according to Robins, executive director of the Resource Conservation

District of Monterey County. Now farmers and officials are racing against biology, bureaucracy and time to remove the plant.

Biological warfare

Ironically, arundo made its Salinas debut as an invited guest. Norm Groot, the Monterey County Farm Bureau executive director, said the Army Corps of Engineers planted the grass over 60 years ago to protect levee banks from erosion. The East Asian reeds accomplished the job with flair, but spread rapidly.

"It crowds out native species and consumes massive amounts of water," Groot said.

The plant also threatens native animals.

Sasha Gennet, a senior scientist at the Nature Conservancy explained, "Once it invades an area, very few insects, birds or other species of wildlife can find food or water there. Common species like sparrows, as well as rare [bird] species like Bell's vireos, are impacted."

Biology drives arundo's persistence, according to Robins. The plant's shallow but sprawling roots soak up water more efficiently than native plants can. Once established, reedy thickets slow the river's flow, causing dirt particles and other flotsam to drop out of the water.

This sediment piles up and eventually makes the river shallower. As arundo resists erosion, it slashes the river's defenses against floods. And with El Niño approaching, there's a war on.

Robins' team battles the plant along the stretch of river between King City and Greenfield. Because uprooting arundo may displace soil and cause erosion, the team members mow the plant instead. That's just the beginning.

"With the mowing, we actually stimulate the regrowth of the plant," Robins said.

After mowing brown, dry stalks in autumn, workers wait for fresh, green reeds to shoot up. By spring, the grasses grow as tall as cornstalks. The team let the leaves grow full and absorbent before spraying them with herbicide in the summer. To avoid native plants, they apply the herbicide by hand. The arundo returns the following year, but at a lower rate.

"We could potentially have the entire river under treatment within 10 years," Robins said.

That timeframe, however, depends upon the voluntary participation of landowners along the river, most of them farmers. And the farmers say that the arduous application process for permits has tied their hands.

"They've put so many restrictions on managing the vegetation in the river, they've made it impossible for people to fix it," said farmer Bardin Bengard of regulatory agencies.

Bureaucratic battle

The notion of privately owning a chunk of river may seem novel, but the concept traces back to medieval Europe, when kings owned navigable water channels, and private citizens claimed non-navigable ones. When settlers traveled to the U.S., they brought the legal tradition with them, according to Leon Szeptycki, executive director of Stanford's Water in the West program.

Owners bear the responsibility of maintaining their river portion, but are restricted in how they do so. Szeptycki compared these restrictions to the zoning laws that accompany a house.

“You’re subject to zoning laws because of the effect your property can have on the rest of the community. It’s even more the case with water, because of the effect an upstream user can have on those downstream.”

Why don’t laws require landowners to remove arundo? Ownership restrictions usually prohibit actions, rather than require them, according to Lloyd Lowrey Jr. of the law firm Noland, Hamerly, Etienne, and Hoss.

Riverbed owners “tend to be more nervous about doing things than not doing things,” he said.

But many farmers want to remove the arundo, and Robins claims the effort needs them.

Race against time

To obtain permits, Salinas farmers must either apply for coverage under Robins’ permit and use identical methods, or they must file a completely new application themselves.

When Robins’ team applied for permits in Greenfield, they had to seek approval from five different state and federal agencies in a process lasting four years.

For the past two years, Groot has worked on a permit application for 2016. The process requires extensive modeling, which must be adjusted after any major weather event.

“The overriding issue here is that the actual work to maintain the river channel itself is a minor portion of the cost of the process at this point. The permits, the modeling, and the application for the permits far exceed the cost or the timeframe involved in doing this work,” Groot said.

Groot suggested that if the agencies streamlined the process and designated arundo as “exotic,” they could issue all the permits for removal collectively and speed the process.

In places like Greenfield, where arundo removal has begun, the Nature Conservancy’s Gennet praised the work.

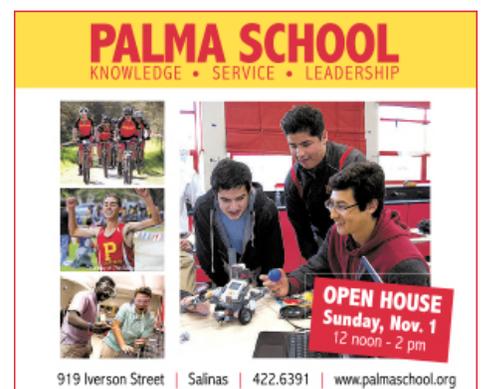
“They are taking a systematic, aggressive approach to dealing with the arundo infestation, and have landowners and funders lined up to support a lot of the work that’s required to get it done,” Gennet said.

In Salinas, landowners may be lined up, but they stand at the end of a laborious and serpentine application queue.

“I fully believe that this is something that everyone thinks about every day because of the upcoming El Niño event,” Groot said.

Meanwhile, the reeds along the Salinas River grow skyward.

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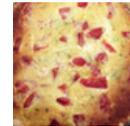


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