

Tourism could be devastated

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can do its work, with not a flower in sight and creosote bushes dying.

"If this happens through the entire valley, obviously the tourism will be devastated," Garmon said.

Plus, Garmon said, the mustard grows so prolifically that, when the plants die, fuel quickly accumulates on the desert floor.

"The wildfire threat will be dramatically enhanced," Garmon said. "Many of us feel the future of Borrego Springs is at stake."

Last March, Garmon and friends tried a hands-on approach to fighting mustard in Tubb Canyon, pooling their resources and hiring a work crew that removed 750 large garbage bags of the plants.

The effort, which cost \$2,500 for labor alone, made the neighbors realize that a more far-reaching approach, and a lot more money, would be needed to make headway against the plant.

"We realized if we were to be successful, we would have to form a non-profit," Garmon said. "Organizations and agencies don't give grants to a handful of neighbors."

So far, so good. The conservancy has secured a federal AmeriCorps grant to bring 8-12 mustard fighters/community organizers to the

valley from Jan. 19 to March 9.

Garmon said the crew will pick mustard, but also organize area businesses, schools, organizations and neighborhoods to do the same, hopefully establishing a grid system with assigned mustard-pulling stations throughout the valley.

He compared it to the "Adopt a Highway" model.

These short-term efforts, while labor intensive, are needed to hold the plant in check while scientists explore methods of eradicating it.

Medium-range solutions, Garmon said, center around herbicides. The conservancy has provided land for research in Tubb Canyon, hoping the UC Cooperative Extension can find the right mix of herbicides, and the proper timing, to kill mustard without also killing the flowers. It acquired a \$7,000 grant from the Desert Protective Council to help underwrite the research.

The long-term solution, Garmon said, "has to be biocontrol. We need a parasite, a virus, a bacteria; something we can introduce into the environment to control the mustard."

Until then, Garmon advises residents to keep pulling all the mustard weeds they can. "If we let it grow unchecked, the whole valley will be like Henderson Canyon."

— By Casey Jones

