Skeletonweed

By Merle Keys, Wasco County Weed & Pest Department
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Since the early 1980’s, County Weed Departments have been actively trying to keep Rush Skeletonweed from spreading to other areas. This noxious weed has the ability to decrease production significantly on your lands. Rush skeletonweed is a weed with the potential to disrupt an entire industry. Lack of control in rangeland areas poses a serious threat to the Northwest wheat industry.

In Australia, the plant competes so strongly with wheat production that large acreages have been converted from grain to pasture. Annual losses of over $30 million were attributed to Rush skeletonweed in Australia where the weed reduced grain yields by as much as 70 percent. The weed has wirey, latex-exuding stems which can make grain harvesting difficult or impossible.

So you’re not a wheat grower. How does this affect you? Well, read on and you’ll see this plant is difficult to control and can take over a grazing field just as quickly as a wheat field if left to spread, or attempted to control in a normal method.

The plant spreads by seed and lateral roots which enable a single plant to become an entire colony. The plant produces a main taproot capable of penetrating soil depths of 10 feet, and the lateral roots grow off of this. This causes may problems on the control side. Even small root pieces resulting from cultivation can spread an infestation. The plants overwinter as rosettes and begin flowering in early summer. Flowering continues until fall frost with each plant producing over 15,000 seeds. Each seed has a parachute of fine hairs which permit wide dispersal upon the wind.

Rush skeletonweed rosettes resemble the dandelion, but the rosette dies back as flower stalks develop. Skeletonweed is a good name for this plant as the stems of the mature plant are sparsely leaved and wiry in appearance. The plant may be one to four feet in height, with bright yellow flower heads, ¾ inch in diameter. One of the most reliable identifying features are the downward bent, coarse, brown hairs found on the lower four to six inches of the stem after the plant has bolted.

If a Skeletonweed plant is pulled, the root system will produce new plants. The weed should not be cultivated because damage to the plant without killing it can spread the infestation.

If you find this plant on your property, the best immediate action to take is to make sure the plant doesn’t go to seed. A good pair of gloves and hand pruners will remove the flowers, but don’t expect this to hinder the plant too much. It will put more seeds into production rather quickly.
If you would like help with identification of this plant and recommendations for control, please contact your local Weed Control office.