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Musk Thistle Control

Ample moisture and warming temperatures have greened up our cool season grass stands. That means musk thistle is growing as well! Musk thistle is a biennial or winter annual species. As a biennial, seed germinates in the spring with plants as rosettes for the growing season. The next springs, plants bolt, flower, and produce seeds. Winter annuals emerge in late fall, go through winter, then produce seed the following year. Since it reproduces only by seed, control programs have to include reduction or elimination of seed production.

Mechanical control options include mowing or cutting. Mowing at the bloom stage will prevent seed production, but it usually takes two or three mowing's at two to four week intervals. Cutting requires removal of individual plants two to four inches below the soil.

Biologically, musk thistle head and rosette weevils can help reduce seed production.

Prescribed burning and good grazing management can help keep musk thistle populations at reduced levels. Burning by itself will not kill musk thistle, but can remove excess litter that prevents good spray coverage (spray 10-14 days post burn). In warm season grass stands, burning stimulates growth of warm season species to compete with musk thistle. Proper grazing that maintains or improves grass vigor can also help keep populations down.

Chemical control is most effective during the seedling and rosette growth stages. Products containing 2, 4-D, dicamba, picloram, metsulfuron, chlorsulfuron, aminopyralid, and clopyralid are all effective on musk thistle. Always read and follow label directions, as effectiveness varies by growth stage and grazing/haying restrictions must be followed. Treat musk thistle before bloom. While some herbicides have been shown to reduce seed viability at the bloom stage, it is unlikely that all seed production will be eliminated. Full herbicide recommendations for musk thistle control can be found in the 2016 KSU Chemical Weed Control Guide available from your District Office. Local Noxious Weed Departments are also a great source of control information as well.

Nightcrawlers in the Lawn

Before long, mowing activity will remind us of how bumpy our lawn is! Often, we blame those lousy moles (that's next week's issue!), but nightcrawlers could also be the culprit. Nightcrawler bumps are randomly spaced rather than a "run" that is characteristic of moles.

These large worms are deep burrowers that build large, vertical burrows five to six feet deep, pulling plant material down as they go. The bumps they leave are 'middens', a mixture of plant residues and worm feces. The burrows open up channels for water and air to penetrate, improving soils and providing easy avenues for root penetration. Unfortunately, they aren't all positive! They also make it hard to mow or walk on the lawn when they dry and harden.

Getting rid of middens is difficult. Rolling the lawn while the middens are soft may help, but mounds will be rebuilt when nightcrawlers become active again. There are no products labelled for nightcrawler control.

If you don't mind the middens and want to protect the nightcrawlers because of their positive effect on soils, make sure you understand how pesticides affect populations. Some products (Dylox for example) have no effect while carbaryl and copper products are extremely toxic. Their use should be avoided when nightcrawlers are active.