INVASIVE WEED AWARENESS COALITION (IWAC)

Pulling Together Resources to Help Nesting Sea Turtles Succeed

South Carolina BEACH VITEX TASK FORCE

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NATIONAL INVASIVE WEED AWARENESS WEEK

Along the coast of South Carolina, loggerhead sea turtles climb the beach every summer to lay eggs in the sand dunes. A nesting female drags her 300-pound body up the beach to the base of the sand dunes where she uses her hind flippers to dig a hole and bury more than 100 eggs before returning to the ocean. This process can take up to two hours. Weather conditions, human interference and egg predators all pose a threat to the survival of turtle offspring and the population of this federally threatened species. Beach vitex *(Vitex rotundifolia)*, a deciduous, woody vine from the Pacific Rim now invading the South Carolina coastlines, is also damaging turtle nesting sites.

Challenge:

Beach vitex was introduced to the Southeastern United States in the mid-1990s for use as an ornamental and for beach stabilization. It has since crowded out native dune plants and lines miles of oceanfront properties. The quickly spreading vine has overtaken turtle nesting sites and jeopardized turtle hatchling survival. Blanketing the ground, beach vitex impairs the female's ability to dig a nest and lay eggs. Even when the eggs are able to hatch, the hatchlings can become entangled in beach vitex as they struggle to find their way to the ocean.

Beach vitex damages turtle nesting sites in South Carolina.

Solution:

The South Carolina Beach Vitex Task Force formed with a Pulling Together Initiative grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. Through the collaborative efforts of several government agencies, volunteers and scientific researchers, the task force has developed a monitoring, education and control program, and soon hopes to rid the coastline of beach vitex. Aquatic herbicides have been tested by researchers at Clemson University and the U.S. Geological Survey in an effort to control beach vitex. Once the invasive plant is eradicated, the dunes will be replanted with native vegetation.

Result:

Fall herbicide applications removed 90 percent of beach vitex in test plots by targeting the root of the plant during its dormant season and without impacting turtle nesting cycles. Volunteers continue tracking new plant infestations using advanced GPS technology, and work to educate beachfront landowners on the ecological dangers of beach vitex, which will likely not continue spreading. The threatened loggerhead sea turtles will eventually regain their critical nesting habitat.

Learn More:

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