

Controlling Prickly Pear in your Pastures

By Marty Morgan, Wise County Ag Agent

Growing up in West Central TX we were blessed with several different species of cactus but Prickly Pear was the most predominant. It was a real problem in our pastures as it was competition for our native grasses, and it was especially a problem in the winter time or during a drought when cows were hungry and the Pear is green. If it looks green, eat it, right! Well some cows do; they get needles in their mouth and tongue and start slobbering, tongue will swell up and gets to where they have a hard time chewing, and then they lose weight. You know what I mean if you have pears. They can interfere with the movement of livestock and cause serious health problems. We grubbed em, burnt em, plowed em but never sprayed em because it's hard to spray where there is regrowth live oak and too many to spray by hand over hundreds of acres, unless you use an airplane, then it becomes very expensive. I remember carrying a butane bottle and pear burner torch in the winter and before you could get one burnt the cows were there running over each other, and you too, to eat the warmly toasted needle free pear. But it's a never ending job, but hey it was better than a snowball! Instead of spending our time fighting pears Dad thought it was more productive to cut firewood we could use and sell. So fighting pear took a backseat to wood cutting and the pear marched on.

So how do we try to control prickly pear nowadays? When it comes to the task of trying to get prickly pear growth under control there are several methods that you can try. The first is Perseverance! You know the steady persistence in a course of action in spite of difficulties, obstacles, or discouragement! A never give up attitude because they are persistent. There are physical methods which I can tell you from experience are no fun, especially in lime rock country, and seldom completely eradicate it. This can work if you are dealing with a small area or not a lot of prickly pear growing in the area. All this would require is either a grubbing hoe or a shovel. Cut the main root of the plant 2 to 4 inches below the surface to get the whole plant. It is best to do this method during hot and dry conditions, yeah when the ground is hard as a rock. Whatever you do just make sure that no part of the plant is left touching the ground or it will re-sprout. Then there are mechanical methods like disking, chaining, or root plowing that will destroy the top growth but because of how well it can spread you may have a denser growing of prickly pear. If you can afford one, the ole skid steer is a more modern day approach, and will do a great job of pushing and piling but it too leaves a lot of roots in the ground that will come back to haunt you. In some cases mulching/grinding or two-way raiiling may be considered for control. As with the physical control method it is best to do this during hot and dry conditions to get the most effective result. Prescribed burning can be another way to help control this beast of a plant. For this method to be effective there must be a good amount of fine fuel to make sure this fire is burning really hot. If the fire does not get hot enough or last long enough then you will really only get a top kill. New pads will grow back from the surviving tissue and you will be back to square one in about 3 to 5 years. What about aerial spraying with herbicides? This method is a good one to use if you need to treat a very wide open area or it is an area that is hard to get into with other methods. Though for aerial spraying to be effective it is recommended to do this either in the spring or fall because cactus is a cool season plant. Using Surmount at a rate of 2 quarts per acre has been shown to provide about a 75% control of cactus with aerial spraying. There is also Tordon 22K that we have used

since the early 1990's, which the main ingredient is 24.4 % Picloram. Then they come out with Surmount which has 13.24% Picloram and 10.64% Fluroxypr and it had about a 75% control rate. Well now we have one called Mezavue, which soon will replace Surmount in the near future. They have performed numerous trials over the last several years and Corteva has introduced Mezavue as the new standard for prickly pear control. Active ingredients are Aminopyralid at 5.15%, Picloram at 10.06% and Fluroxypr at 12.53%. As you can see Mezavue is just Surmount on steroids.

Pad or Stem spray method works better on relatively thin strands of cactus such as along a fence line or in a small concentrated area of the pasture. Unlike the aerial method this one can be used year round. The Brush Busters program with the Texas AgriLife extension program recommends using Tordon 22K. The recommended mixture for this method is 1% Tordon to water. You will spray the pads or stems of the cactus are almost wet but not to the point of runoff. In order to get more consistent and faster results it is recommended to spray both sides of the pad. One drawback of this using this method is that complete kill of the plant will take a little bit of time. Though the pads will start to yellow very quickly it typically takes 2 to 3 years for the entire plant to die.

Controlling strategies-Since each treatment method has it's own pros and cons using any of the methods discussed above will require careful planning. Small areas of infestation on otherwise clear areas should be given priority for treatment. If you are dealing with of larger infestation areas then you should begin by treating the outside perimeter of the area and work your way into the center. Which ever method you go with it is best to remember that prickly pear will not be completely eradicated within one year of treatment. Acceptable levels of control will usually take 2-3 years of repeated treatments with follow up treatments taking an additional 2-3 years.

Remember that Prickly pear is a very hard plant to control since it is very adaptable and able to re-sprout very quickly. In review, some methods of control that can be used are: Physical- removing the plant with either a shovel or grubbing hoe, Mechanical- mulching or two-way rail are good methods, Prescribed burning, Aerial spraying, and Pad or stem spraying. So good luck with your battle against this prickly beast and let me know if you need help or have any questions.