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# Invasives pollination study shows mixed results for Alaska berries

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Posted: Friday, August 23, 2013 11:45 pm

Jeff Richardson/jrichardson@newsminer.com | 2 comments



Courtesy Christa Mulder

## Sweet clover

Katie Spellman (left) and Christa Mulder (right) with some of the sweet clover plants they were outplanting, removing, at the end of the experiment.



FAIRBANKS — An effort to see whether a common invasive plant is drawing pollinators away from native berries may be finding that there's usually enough room for everyone.

The results are starting to solidify from a University of Alaska Fairbanks research project into the subject, which is being funded by a \$493,000 federal grant awarded in 2010. The U.S. Department of Agriculture wanted UAF to take a four-year look at whether the invasive white sweetclover plant is hurting wild native food sources.

White sweetclover has thrived throughout Alaska during the past few decades, which makes it a potential competitor with native wild foods. The leggy plant is from Europe and Asia, but it's become a common sight along Alaska roads, riverbanks and wildfire burns.

Researchers at UAF and the University of Alaska Anchorage wanted to see if insects that would otherwise be visiting blueberry or cranberry bushes were being lured away by the flowery, fragrant white sweetclover plants.

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The early results are mixed, but it doesn't appear white sweetclover is offering crippling competition for pollinating insects. In some cases, berry plants may actually get a pollination boost when the intruders are nearby.

"It's fair to say there's no great drama here," said UAF biology professor Christa Mulder, who led the research team. "We don't have to panic that we're going to lose every single berry."

The survey team monitored about 20 sites in 2011 and 2012 along the Steese, Elliott and Dalton highways where white sweetclover patches were located. Based on monitoring done at those

locations, it appeared the invasive patches were actually attracting three times as many pollinators to native plants as they would otherwise get.

In addition to the bee species that the native berries usually attracted, they also got appearances from a variety of flies, moths and wasps.

"When you add sweetclover, there are a lot more things flying around and a lot more things visited," said Katie Spellman, a UAF doctoral student.

In those wild plots, cranberry plants produced more fruit when they were at sites with white sweetclover. Blueberries had about the same amount.

The reason, however, is unclear. It is possible that the sites where white sweetclover exists are simply fertile areas that are prone to producing good berries, Mulder thought.

To verify those results, researchers decided to shift their work to a more controlled setting. They introduced white sweetclover plants in 18 experimental sites around UAF, then monitored the results.

The data from those plots, which was collected during the summers of 2011 and 2012, showed more variation.

During a rainy June in the first year, conditions seemed to draw pollinators away from native berry plants that were a moderate distance away. During a sunny June in 2012, conditions were good enough that all the plants seemed to benefit.

The research effort is being supplemented with data from nearly 200 "citizen scientists" who have volunteered to monitor sites throughout Alaska to find out when and where the flowering periods of berries and sweetclover overlap.

Together, the results suggest that some geographical areas may be more vulnerable to white sweetclover competition through pollinators than others. One of those areas is the Interior, where cranberry plants and white sweetclover have overlapping flowering times, Mulder said.

The most important competition between the species, however, could be for space. Mulder said white sweetclover towers over berry plants and adds nitrogen to the soil, which are factors that could cause it to slowly crowd native plants out of their turf.

Mulder said she plans to pursue additional grant money to continue studying those interactions between invasive and native plants.

"I feel like we've gotten good answers," she said, "but you ask one set of questions and a whole new set opens up."

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