

Environment: As invasive plant disappears, so do funds to keep it at bay

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Beach vitex has been all but obliterated on the South Carolina coast since the S.C. Beach Vitex Task Force was formed in 2003. But work must continue to make sure the plant doesn't make a comeback.

"We're not celebrating a victory," Betsy Brabson, task force coordinator, said this week at what might be the last annual Beach Vitex Symposium.

The group has received \$800,000 in grant funding over the last eight years, but its last grant expires next year and it doesn't have any others lined up. That could ostensibly be the end of the task force and Brabson said she thinks it's time for a state agency to take over.

However, she knows the economy makes this a bad time for any agency to take on more duties.

The task force and its partners, which include a number of state and federal agencies, are also calling for property owners to take an active role in keeping the plant under control. Owners are asked to monitor their properties for reemergence of beach vitex, reporting any sightings and "maybe applying a little Roundup" before plants have a chance to grow and spread.

The group is also promoting planting of sea oats and other native plants on the dunes, and hopes more nurseries will cultivate and sell them.

Known as the "kudzu of the coast," beach vitex covered the dunes in many spots along the beach, edging out native plants and trapping sea turtle hatchlings, when the task force formed. The group decided to take a closer look at how beach vitex was affecting the ecosystem. There was virtually no information on the plant before then. The work proved their initial thoughts had been on target. Beach vitex, originally planted to help stabilize the dunes after Hurricane Hugo in 1989, had to go.

Chuck Gresham, who retired from Clemson University

in 2009, led the research into the plant and showed a short video of one of his work. It showed him placing drops of water on sand taken from beneath beach vitex plants. Instead of being absorbed, the drops beaded on top of the sand as they would have on wax paper.

Patrick McMillan, a Clemson University naturalist and

host of ETV's "Expeditions with Patrick McMillan," compared the effect to what eucalyptus trees do to the soil. Showing a forest of the trees, he said if they were cut down, even 200 years later nothing else would grow there.

"Thank God you started in time," he told the group, adding that it's extremely rare for an invasive plant to be on the verge of being eradicated.

"We've gotten the job almost done," Brabson said. "But beach vitex isn't going to lay down and die. It's not an easy or a cheap plant to get rid of, but we can't turn our back on it. It's too aggressive."

Beach vitex has been removed from more than 200 sites, but seeds can remain viable after four years, said Jack Whetstone, another Clemson retiree who worked on the project.

The plant was just found at a new site in Surfside Beach this summer.

It's necessary to keep searching for funding to eliminate new plants as they are found, but property owners will be the key to keeping the problem under control. In general, they have been cooperative so far in allowing work to take place on their properties.

"Most have been very accommodating and even apologized for planting it, but there are some holdouts," Brabson said.

One DeBordieu property owner has refused to get rid of the plant on his land, but "the house is up for sale and we're hoping the next owner will be a little more agreeable."

Pawleys Island Mayor Bill Otis said some island property owners were initially opposed to allowing the plant to be removed, but the town passed an ordinance making owners responsible for preventing beach vitex on their properties from spreading. Faced with having to pay someone to manage the plant, they changed their minds.

Otis still hears people say they "think that vitex was prettier than what we've got now."

"But I think most folks on Pawleys are very appreciative" of the task force's efforts, he said.

Debbie Mann of the Natural Resources Conservation Service said people's first reaction when they see beach vitex is usually to say it's a pretty plant. It has dark green, oval-shaped leaves and produces purple flowers in the summer. She agrees it's attractive, but "it gets real ugly real fast ... You could almost sit there and watch it grow."

Most coastal residents can identify a mature beach vitex plant, but they need to be better versed in spotting young plants, said Hal Droter, eradication coordinator for the task force. Identification tips are available at the task force