

**Statement of
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**Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation and Public Lands
Committee on Resources
United States House of Representatives
on
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Concerning

H.R. 1462 - Harmful Nonnative Weed Control Act of 2001

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am Michael Rains, Deputy Chief, State and Private Forestry, USDA Forest Service. My comments today represent the views of the USDA on H.R. 1462, Harmful Nonnative Weed Control Act of 2001.

First, I would like to thank the subcommittee for recognizing noxious weeds as a significant threat to our nation's ecosystem health. Non-native invasive plants alter ecosystem functions and reduce biological diversity by eliminating native plants, which in turn can lower the water table, increase soil erosion, runoff, and/or increase fire frequency and intensity. Non-native invasive plants also change the plant community used by domestic livestock, wildlife, and recreationists. These changes in the ecosystem often result in eliminating or restricting use of our wildlands and urban areas and increase the economic costs associated with these losses. We face a daunting challenge in managing non-native invasive plants, but the Department is

committed to working with the Committee to identify solutions. USDA is in a strong position to address non-native invasive species because of the broad authorities supporting non-native species management: field operations for prevention, detection, control, monitoring and restoration; research and technology development; technical assistance to States, Tribes and private landowners; financial assistance including cooperative agreements and grants; and international collaboration.

USDA supports the objectives of H.R. 1462 to address the problem of invasive non-native plants. The Department supports the premise of the bill, that controlling invasive plants should be solved at the local level with support provided by a multitude of partners. USDA has numerous programs and delivery systems already in place under existing statutory authorities to address non-native invasive species management. Within the Forest Service in particular, there is a full range of existing authorities to support an integrated program of research and development, technical assistance and management of invasive species on public and private lands. These programs focus on invasive insects such as the Asian longhorn beetle and Gypsy Moth, invasive pathogens such as Sudden Oak Death Disease, and non-native invasive plants, which are the focus of this bill.

For reasons I will detail in my testimony, USDA strongly supports the concept of allocating more resources for controlling non-native invasive plants at the local level. However, H.R. 1462 raises a number of questions for USDA. The Department would like to engage the Committee in more detail regarding (1) process, accountability and federal involvement; (2) compatibility with existing authorities in USDA; (3) scope of the legislation; and (4) current partnership funding.

The Department would like to work with the Committee to resolve some of the issues raised by this bill and move toward outcomes that will integrate the collaborative, multi-agency planning that has begun over the past three years at all levels of government for invasive plants (and other non-native invasive species) management.

Process, Accountability and Federal Involvement

Under H.R. 1462, roles and duties of the advisory committee should be identified to ensure duties and responsibilities carried out by the Executive Branch are not being delegated to outside entities. States would also need authority from Federal agencies to manage weeds on Federal land, in particular National Forest System lands. USDA would like to work with the Committee to address these issues of concern, in particular management of Federal land. The Department believes these decisions should remain within the jurisdiction of Federal land managers.

H.R. 1462 would set up a new program entirely within the U.S. Department of the Interior. Six USDA agencies have programs that help manage the invasive plant issue. USDA is highly interested in working with the Committee to identify areas where these programs can be enhanced by this bill, and to determine what existing USDA programs fit well with the Department of the Interior programs proposed in this bill to avoid any redundancy.

USDA has some issues regarding implementation and coordination if a new program dealing with invasive species management is developed in the Department of the Interior. Under H.R. 1462, a new advisory committee would be created, exempt from the Federal Advisory Committee Act of 1972. The roles and duties of this committee are not clear, particularly in

relationship to already existing advisory committees, such as the Invasive Species Advisory Committee that was created by Executive Order 13112. Members on the Invasive Species Advisory Committee were appointed by the National Invasive Species Council, which is an inter-Departmental Council, co-chaired by the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, and the Interior. Also, there are a number of other diverse stakeholder committees that could be used as an advisory committee to provide peer review of submitted projects from “weed management entities”. One such program is the “Pulling Together Initiative Steering Committee” sponsored by the Federal Interagency Committee for Management of Noxious and Exotic Weeds (FICMNEW). The Pulling Together Partnership Initiative has been ongoing since 1996, and is a multi-agency effort that provides federal matching grants through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation for local and regional weed prevention and control projects. Federal agencies involved include the FS, BLM, FWS, Bureau of Reclamation, NPS, Department of Defense, and APHIS (Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service).

USDA notes very little specific direction in the bill on how funds will be allocated to and by the States. The Department would like to work with the Committee to establish criteria in the bill to ensure that regional differences and needs are accounted for and that a balance of funding is achieved among regions and states.

USDA recommends that a mechanism for State and local consultation and/or coordination with Federal partners be specified in the bill. Currently, the bill requires no consultation or coordination with Federal agencies other than allocation by the Secretary of the Interior of funds to the States based on input from an advisory committee established by H.R. 1462. Coordination

and consultation is important between Federal and private landowners who work together to manage non-native weeds that grow across boundaries. An example of this coordinated effort is occurring on the Humboldt-Toiyabe NF where noxious weeds are confined to several thousand acres and are still considered to be in manageable patches. The State of Nevada is allocating available funds to this area based on the coordinated efforts by local entities and Federal managers to eradicate invasive weeds. The coordination and priority setting that is occurring between Federal, State, and private partners becomes more critical as State and Federal funds are allocated that impact multi-jurisdictional boundaries. USDA would like to work with the Committee to identify language to address the issue of coordination and consultation with Federal agencies. Fostering a climate of cooperation and coordination with all concerned entities results in increased sharing of expertise, information, resources, experience, and applied action to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of any invasive weed management program.

Compatibility with Existing Authorities in USDA

Currently, within USDA there are six agencies that have a leadership role in dealing with the introduction and spread of invasive species and involved in research, regulation, operations, partnerships, technical and financial assistance, and education. APHIS is the front line of prevention, dealing with detecting and mitigating disseminations, and providing control of new introductions. The USDA research agencies, Agricultural Research Service, Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service and Forest Service, provide information on the basic ecology of invasive species, as well as detection, monitoring and control methodologies and technologies. The Forest Service responsibilities include Research and Development, State and Private Forestry, and the National Forest System. In addition it has the lead for research in

natural areas. The Forest Service has a broad range of authorities to address the invasive species issue and to coordinate with other Federal agencies with corresponding responsibilities.

Forest Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, APHIS and Farm Services Administration provide technical and financial assistance, consultation, and technology transfer prevention, control of invasive species, and landscape restoration following an invasion or disaster. The invasive species programs in these agencies run both independently and collaboratively. FICMNEW is a prime example of a collaborative government effort affecting land management. FICMNEW was established under a Memorandum Of Understanding signed by 17 Federal Agencies in 1994, with the charge of enhancing Federal coordination for the management of weeds. Member agencies seek to improve the Federal government's ability to prevent, control, and manage harmful non-indigenous plant species, maintain and restore healthy ecosystems, and preserve biological diversity on Native American and Federal lands and waters, with assistance on private lands and waters. Federal agencies work cooperatively to achieve this through advancement of knowledge and skills, good land stewardship practices, public awareness of noxious weed issues and management, and collaborative projects. We will work with the Committee to ensure that H.R. 1462 does not conflict, and where possible enhances, existing USDA programs.

Scope of the Legislation

FICMNEW stated in a 1998 report that invasive plants (called non-native weeds in the bill) cause more than \$20 billion per year in economic damage and affect millions of acres of all types of private and public lands across the United States. H.R. 1462 provides a framework for States

and local governments to work with local weed groups to control and eradicate invasive plants. However, the Department is concerned how balance will be maintained between different regions of the U.S. or how multiple state efforts will be supported.

Under the bill's framework it may be difficult for the Southeast and eastern States to compete with Western states that have an existing infrastructure likely to qualify as "weed management entities". There currently exist well over 100 weed management areas that have been organized at the local level by various partners in the west. These organizations are virtually non-existent in the eastern States. USDA would like to work with the Committee to identify potential alternative structures, which partner with the Natural Resource Conservation Service, such as conservation districts, which could serve as "weed management entities".

The Department would like to work with the Committee to ensure that the bill adequately addresses multiple state efforts. Partnerships with States (especially those adjoining other States), other Federal agencies, and local groups are important since plants grow across jurisdictional areas. Projects can be split at the State line and funded separately while being coordinated across State lines, but additional constraints are sometimes imposed when this occurs. The recent fires in Idaho and Montana for example, demonstrate how natural forces do not heed political boundaries. As a result of the 2000 fire season, in the states of Idaho and Montana, the Forest Service has spent approximately \$24.5 million in treating invasive plants on National Forest System lands and private lands (4.2 million in NFS noxious weeds funding, 17.0 million from the National Fire Plan Restoration program, and 3.5 million from State and Private

Forestry funds). Many of these invasive species treatments are directly attributable to interstate coordination.

The Department also believes that the bill language should clarify to indicate that the purpose of funding for weed management entities through this bill is, at least in part, for environmental restoration purposes as much as it may be for economic purposes.

Current Partnership Funding

Invasive weeds have been coming into this country for over a century, and they are well established in many areas. New species continue to be encountered at our national border and at individual State's borders. USDA along with agencies in the Department of the Interior has been working with State and local entities for many years on various partnerships to eradicate this problem. Funds have been allocated through these partnerships and the Department continues to participate in them. H.R. 1462 does not identify funding sources for the States allocation, the incentive payment program, or how this program will relate to projects already funded in USDA. This program could involve significant new funding obligations that are not now assumed in the President's Budget. It is unclear how much funding is needed or how it will be paid for. Because the bill does not include an authorization of appropriations section that would provide a separate authorization of funds, we are concerned that there would be no authorization limit on funds or any assurance that this program would not impact existing agency and multi-agency programs that support local and regional weed prevention and control projects. The Department

would like to work with the Committee to ensure currently funded programs are continued and adequate funding provided.

The bill's impact on current partnerships for local action, such as, the multi-agency "Pulling Together Initiative" (PTI) mentioned earlier is uncertain. In FY 2001 the Forest Service contributed \$300,000 to this program. In addition to FS support of the PTI program, the FS also directly supports local weed entities through its S&PF and NFS programs. Many projects are already underway with this initiative, which demonstrate some of our best examples of need, partnerships, integrated weed management, and monitoring.

USDA has found that research and technology development is often critical to successful land management, including efforts with State and local partners. Similarly, restoration actions following weed treatments are often key to sustaining control and ecosystem health over the long-term. Options are needed for supporting applied field tests, technology development and restoration actions, which are essential components of an effective on-the-ground management strategy. The Department would like to work with the Committee to identify how "weed management entities" can obtain flexibility to fund and conduct field tests, demonstrations and other applied research activities when these components are essential for success of management goals.

Once weeds are brought under control or eradicated, it is important to consider what will come in behind them. USDA believes the bill should provide for and encourage the restoration of a treated area, thus lessening impacts of the treatment as well as improving the health of the site

making it less vulnerable to re-infestation. Knowledge from research and development would help “weed management entities” in evaluating what tools and/or techniques can best be used in an area that needs treatment.

In conclusion, non-native invasive species threaten forest and rangeland sustainability and ecosystem viability. Populations of invasive plants in the U.S. are expanding annually by 7 to 14%. Although there are points of concern related to this bill, both the Department and its Agencies believe this bill is a commendable effort to address invasive species management on public and private lands.

The Department is committed to working cooperatively with the Committee and the bill sponsors toward solutions that will meet our mutual concerns and objectives.

This concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.