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**Testimony of
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United States Department of Agriculture

**Before the
Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans**

**Committee on Resources
United States House of Representatives**

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to speak with you on behalf of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) about exotic bird species and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. I would like to start by providing a brief overview of Wildlife Services.

As part of USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), the Wildlife Services Division provides Federal leadership and expertise to resolve damage caused by wildlife. Over the last decade, Wildlife Services' mission has expanded beyond agricultural damage management to include minimizing threats to public health and safety, resolving wildlife conflicts in urban areas, protecting property, safeguarding threatened and endangered species, and preserving valuable natural resources, such as the Chesapeake Bay area.

Wildlife Services provides assistance on a request basis. In addition to working with individuals, Wildlife Services works cooperatively with other Federal, State, and local governments that request assistance to manage wildlife damage. These cooperators share in the cost of many wildlife damage management activities conducted by Wildlife Services.

Resolving damage caused by exotic bird species is one of many areas where Wildlife Services has seen an increase in requests for assistance. Some examples of exotic or non-native bird species include starlings, rock doves, house sparrows and mute swans.

Starlings, native to Europe, are among the most problematic of exotic bird species. Population estimates for starlings now exceed 200 million in North America. In 2002, Wildlife Services dispersed or removed approximately 2.7 million starlings, mainly at dairies and feedlots where in the winter the birds congregate for food and shelter. Damage occurs as the birds consume and contaminate feed with their droppings.

Rock doves, native to the Mediterranean are another exotic species that causes damage across the United States. In 2002, Wildlife Services dispersed or removed more than 69,000 rock doves, mainly from urban areas where the birds cause property damage and threaten public health and safety as their droppings accumulate on sidewalks and buildings. Researchers estimate that Americans spend more than \$1 billion a year to control and clean up after the exotic bird. In addition, rock doves pose a serious risk to air travelers when the birds collide with planes taking off and landing at airports. In Hawaii, that threat led Wildlife Services to remove or disperse exotic chestnut mannikins and zebra doves from local airports.

Wildlife Services has the legislative authority to manage damage or threats posed by exotic bird species, but we do not have the authority to manage the species themselves. In order to manage damage caused by species protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, Wildlife Services must first receive a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Starlings, rock doves, and house sparrows are not protected under the Act and no permit is required.

In the case of the mute swan here in Maryland, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Army Corps of Engineers and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources requested that Wildlife Services assist in efforts to manage the mute swan. As you know, the mute swan, along with the nutria, a large rodent that has destroyed thousands of acres of pristine wetlands, is contributing to the destruction of the Chesapeake's marsh grasses, which filter the bay, provide a valuable food source for native species, and hold together the fragile marsh soil. Concentrations of mute swans have over-grazed bay grasses, which are important habitats for crabs, fish, and other wetland dependent species.

Cooperative efforts of the aforementioned Agencies have helped control populations of nutria. Our cooperative efforts to manage the mute swan were halted by a preliminary injunction issued in a lawsuit brought by the Fund for Animals against the Fish and Wildlife Service in August of 2003. As Mr. Hogan mentioned in his testimony, that case was settled when the Fish and Wildlife Service agreed to:

- Withdraw its Environmental Assessment for the Management of Mute Swans in the Atlantic Flyway,
- Withdraw the related Finding of No Significant Impact,
- And withdraw or terminate all depredation permits.

This agreement did not alter the ability of the Fish and Wildlife Service to authorize Wildlife Services to remove mute swans on an emergency basis in order to protect public health and safety and prevent bird strikes at airports.

I would like to conclude by saying that Wildlife Services has an excellent working relationship with the Fish and Wildlife Service and other State Agencies and we are prepared to continue to work with them in managing invasive bird species. Thank you again for the opportunity to talk to you about Wildlife Services' role in managing damage caused by exotic bird species.