

Committee on Resources

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Statement by the

NATIONAL CATTLEMEN'S BEEF ASSOCIATION

on

Invasive Species

Submitted to the

Joint Subcommittees

on

Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

The Honorable Wayne T. Gilchrest, Chairman

and

National Parks, Recreation and Public Lands

The Honorable George Radanovich, Chairman

of the

House Resources Committee

The Honorable Richard W. Pombo, Chairman

by

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April 29, 2003

Chairman Gilchrest, Chairman Radanovich and Distinguished Members of the Joint Subcommittees on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans and National Parks, Recreation and Public Lands:

On behalf of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA), the trade association of America's cattle farmers and ranchers, and the marketing organization for the largest segment of the nation's food and fiber industry, thank you for your interest in my comments concerning invasive species.

NCBA appreciates the attention the Committee has directed to invasive species issues and also appreciates the opportunity to speak to these Joint Subcommittees on the scope of the invasive species problem. We have long been aware of the economic and environmental harm caused by invasive species. We have urged the Federal Government to recognize invasive species as a priority issue and to develop a national effort to address the problem. We support Executive Order 13112 on Invasive Species. We support the National Invasive Species Council (NISC) that was established by the Executive Order and provided input into the preparation of "Meeting the Invasives Species Challenge", the national management plan developed by NISC, through participation in the Invasive Species Advisory Council. We have also worked with Congress through the appropriations and other legislative processes to direct resources to, and focus attention on, invasive species issues.

While the cattle industry recognizes the threats posed by all invasive species and support all efforts to

manage them, of primary concern to us are those threats posed by invasive weeds. Grasslands and shrublands, often called rangelands, occupy about 35% of the land area of the lower 48 states – 861 million acres. These are the lands that cattle producers primarily rely on to feed their cattle and the health of these lands is a critical factor in ensuring a farm or a ranch's economic viability.

Rangelands provide more than just economic benefits, however. They also provide clean water, clean air and wildlife habitat, as well as societal benefits such as open space and recreational opportunities. Grasslands and shrublands are unique ecosystems that are severely threatened by harmful, non-native terrestrial weeds species. Invasive weeds often have little or no forage value for native animals and livestock, and they threaten the health of all rangelands by out-competing and replacing the native vegetation. They also can make areas more susceptible to catastrophic fire and can radically impact the way an ecosystem functions. Cheatgrass is a widespread invasive plant, and is much more likely than native plants to catch and spread fire. The national management plan developed by NISC states that cheatgrass has accelerated the fire cycle in the west by twenty-fold.

Invasives are the second greatest threat to the survival of biological diversity, second only to habitat loss. The NISC management plan estimates the economic costs of invasive species at \$137 billion annually. Whereas, conservative estimates to cropland agriculture alone have been placed at \$20 billion each year.

Invasive species are spread intentionally and non-intentionally by an almost endless number of sources. And as we become a more global society, the pathways increase exponentially as our methods of travel get easier, borders open and ports of entry become more numerous. Invasives are master hitchhikers, attaching to wildlife, livestock, produce, recreationalists, vehicle tires, and ballast water in ships. Many invasives have been intentionally introduced as ornamental plants.

The tropical soda apple arrived in Florida in 1988 from South America. Seven years later it was estimated that it had invaded 1 million acres in five southern states and Puerto Rico. It spreads by interstate shipment of cattle, hay, and composted manure from infested areas. It replaces edible forage plants and hampers wildlife and livestock movement.

Purple loosestrife, introduced for ornamental and medicinal uses in the 1800's now covers about 4 million acres of wetlands nationally and costs about \$45 million a year in control efforts. It can completely take over wetlands where it crowds out native plants and negatively impacts native fish and wildlife.

Examples seem endless and the list continues to grow. And again, because most non-native species lack predators, once they are introduced they are almost impossible to contain. Prevention, without question, is less costly than eradication or long-term control.

An awareness of the problem and a comprehensive approach to protecting ecosystems is necessary to prevent the introduction and/or spread of invasives. Public education and awareness programs will increase our understanding of the problem and will aid in the development of management plans at the federal, state and local levels. Unfortunately, most educational programs for wildlands, rangelands and croplands to date have been directed mainly at rural populations. Awareness of invasives among the general public is fairly low.

Interdiction and barriers at entry sites are critical, as are the implementation of site-specific management and control measures to prevent establishment and spread from sites of initial introduction. There must also be greater coordination between private landowners and federal, state and local governments.

There must be accurate and timely early detection and rapid response, which would also require proper training of border inspectors, pest management professionals, land managers and landowners. There currently is no comprehensive national system in place for detecting and responding to invasions of non-native species. Rapid response is also hindered by the lack of a centralized communications network for reporting and disseminating information.

Research and funding for experienced technical advisors are severely limited. In fact, funding for many rangeland research programs has dramatically declined during the past decade, despite the increased demands for solutions to the problems created by invasives.

Once prevention has failed, the goal should be to stop the spread of invasives before they become economically or environmentally damaging. A long-term management plan that integrates research, best

management practices, and integrated weed management techniques is critical in order to even attempt to contain invasive species. The management plan developed by NISC is a good start, but implementation has been slow due to funding limitations and other deficiencies that Federal officials have recognized and are working to improve.

New money should be directed to a program that gives states maximum flexibility to direct funds where they can be utilized by local decision makers most effectively. Federal red tape and administrative requirements must be minimized to ensure that the dollars are getting to the ground where they are needed most. For federal lands, a programmatic environmental impact statement is needed so the agencies can deal with all weeds simultaneously, rather than one at a time.

The best method of fighting these invasions is to act locally. Currently, we have a limited amount of resources. Resources can be maximized by diverting funds to the local level to assist those who know best how to manage the land and treat the problem – whether the land is federal or private. And because invasive species know no boundaries, any federal program must allow for funds to be directed where they are most needed.

We should develop a process for setting priorities, inasmuch as funding will always be a limiting factor for invasive species control activities. NCBA believes that our limited federal dollars should be directed to projects that hold the most promise for success, whether they are on federal lands, state lands or private lands, or any combination thereof.

Eradication, like containment, depends on integrated, site-specific management techniques, coordination between federal, state and local governments and landowners, research and public awareness programs, and adequate funding to have any effectiveness at all. However, where invasions are widespread, complete eradication may be impossible.

Most cattle producers spend a lifetime fighting invasive weeds on their farms and ranches. They believe that every effort needs to be made to provide a strong foundation for efficient distribution of federal funds, strive to avoid duplication, coordinate activities between federal and state agencies and private landowners, and provide the flexibility for decisions to be made locally where the problems arise. There currently is legislation before the full committee that NCBA believes would provide a dedicated, coordinated Federal effort to help in the fight against invasive weeds. We support S. 144, the Noxious Weed Control Act of 2003” (Craig, R-ID) that was reported by the Senate on February 11, 2003 and referred to the House Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Rural Development and Research. NCBA also supports H. R. 119, the Harmful Invasive Weed Control Act” (Hefley, R-CO). Both these proposals provide financial assistance through States to eligible weed management entities to control or eradicate harmful weeds on public and private land. H. R. 119, however, requires that the Secretary of Interior consult with the Federal Interagency Committee for the Management of Noxious and Exotic Weeds. The original draft of this legislation established the consulting body as the National Invasive Species Council (NISC). We believe this to be the more appropriate consulting body for the Secretary should be NISC, which is supported by the Invasive Species Advisory Committee, and would urge original draft language be reconsidered.

We are aware that there currently are other legislative proposals that have been offered on invasives beyond these two proposals and we do not oppose those efforts. But because the resource and financial impacts to our industry are so acute, our number one priority must be to focus our attention on efforts to address harmful, invasive weeds.

The National Cattlemen’s Beef Association wishes to express its gratitude to Chairman Gilcrest and Chairman Radanovich for holding this hearing and for focusing attention on invasive species. We look forward to working with the Chairmen and members of this subcommittee on this issue.