

Chesapeake Marsh Restoration/Nutria Control Partnership  
Pilot Program  
Maryland Department of Natural Resources  
Testimony

Before

Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans Sub-Committee

U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on Resources  
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By

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Chairman Wayne T. Gilchrest  
Committee on Resources  
Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans  
Room H2-187 Ford House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and Secretary J. Charles Fox, I thank you for asking us to testify before the Subcommittee on the Maryland Nutria Control Pilot Project (Pilot Project) and H.R. 4044, which authorizes the Secretary of Interior to establish a program to eradicate nutria and restore marshlands in Maryland. We greatly appreciate the support that Pilot Project has received from Congress in recent years.

As you know, the DNR has been a principle partner in the Pilot Project, along with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Tudor Farms, Inc., the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, and the Maryland Fish and Wildlife Research Cooperative. We estimate that nutria has damaged thousands of acres of brackish marsh on Fishing Bay Wildlife Management Area in Dorchester County, Maryland, where the species is most concentrated in the state. We have found individuals from the Chesapeake Bay Bridge south to the Virginia line and on many of our state lands therein. Although nutria damage is not the only cause of loss of marsh in the area, early studies in the Pilot Project demonstrated that nutria cause significant marsh damage.

When feeding, nutria remove entire plants, causing the sediment supporting the plants to erode away. Continuous conversion of marsh habitat to open water in this manner is removing significant habitat for commercially important waterfowl, shell and finfish species and decreasing the ability of protected state lands to support a diversity of native plants and animals. The continued removal of the three-square bulrush marsh, preferred by Maryland's nutria, from Dorchester County and from surrounding areas could result in a change in the local environment, which could in turn prevent the restoration of the marsh. To protect the marsh, nutria eradication must be conducted aggressively and efficiently in order to prevent resettlement in treated marshes. Damaged marsh must be restored immediately in order to maintain an environment that can support marsh plants while nutria are being removed.

The DNR joined forces with the other partners in the Pilot Project to generate the information needed to: 1) develop effective methods and strategies to reduce nutria populations in the Chesapeake Bay wetlands to the point where they are unable to maintain a sustainable population, 2) develop effective marsh habitat restoration methods and strategies, and 3) promote public understanding of the importance of preserving Maryland's wetlands and the threat that nutria poses to those habitats.

The Pilot Project has provided the Partnership with data helpful to the development of an eradication plan, which is being finalized now and is expected to start this month. Through the live trapping that we have done for the past few years, tagging certain animals, fitting certain animals with radio collars and transmitters, and examining the physiological health and reproductive status of others, we have gained a much greater understanding of nutria on Maryland's lower Eastern Shore. The development of marsh habitat restoration methods is on-going and will continue as the eradication of nutria on the lower Eastern Shore gets underway. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is testing sediment in the laboratory for its ability to support the marsh plants that have been damaged by nutria and is now testing sediment spraying on Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge to determine the use of this technology for marsh restoration.

The Pilot Project has been very actively promoting public awareness of the damage that nutria can do to our wetlands and has been featured on national television, including the Discovery Channel, the National Geographic Channel, and CNN. The Pilot Project has also been a feature on local Salisbury, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C. television news programs, Maryland Public Television, and local newspapers many times over the past three years.

The DNR has contributed a total of about \$236,000 to this Pilot Project since its early planning stages in 1999. We are committed to continuing to request state funds to support the project through our budgetary process and will work to raise funds for discreet needs of the eradication effort as well as continue to contribute staff time and state equipment. Unfortunately, like many state governments, our budget opportunities have narrowed since September 11th and the DNR, like all state departments has been asked to reduce its expenditures.

## ERADICATION

Beyond the Pilot Program, the current objective is to implement a test eradication effort in our study area: Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, Fishing Bay Wildlife Management Area, and Tudor Farms, Inc. in Dorchester County, followed by large-scale nutria eradication effort on the lower Eastern Shore. The goal of this will be to eradicate nutria or to reduce the population to unsustainable levels. The test effort will be conducted for two years and the full scale eradication over the following three years. We will test perimeter and saturation trapping in 180 acre plots in the study area. There are approximately 192,870 acres of nutria habitat on the lower Eastern Shore. Each 180-acre plot would be trapped intensively throughout and then more broadly in a second sweep to ensure eradication. Trapping would continue along the perimeter to prevent nutria from moving between treated and untreated plots. We anticipate the cost of the entire effort at \$20 million at the average rate of over \$18,000/180-acre plot. Most of the cost consists of trapper salaries and benefits, as well as data entry staff, project management, equipment and supplies. Two-thirds of that cost represents the initial trapping effort and one-third the second sweep.

We are especially grateful that the Pilot Project was funded at approximately \$1 million in FY02. This has enabled us to embark on the eradication phase of the Project ahead of schedule, a phase which will continue for 2 years. Each year of this phase will cost at least \$1 million. Having first hand experience with this project for over 1 1/2 years, serving on the Pilot Project's Management Team, and through the DNR's over 3-year involvement, I can attest to the continuing need that this effort has for financial support as well as the bare efficiency with which funding is used.

## CONCLUSION

The DNR is committed to the long-term goal of nutria eradication in Maryland and the restoration of marsh that has been damaged by nutria. We will continue to dedicate management, administrative, and biological staff; request state funds; and solicit private funds to ensure that these efforts can succeed. Exotic/invasive species impact federal, state and private lands and, by definition, can multiply and move among these lands, and cost of control and habitat restoration is such that these efforts cannot succeed without strong financial and implementation partnerships. We urge Congress to authorize appropriations necessary to ensure that this partnership remains strong and that prior federal and state investments can contribute to an active effort to eradicate nutria in Maryland.

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