

Statement by the
NATIONAL CATTLEMEN'S BEEF ASSOCIATION
and PUBLIC LANDS COUNCIL
on
H. R. 3558, the Species Protection and Conservation of the Environment Act

Submitted to the
House Resources Committee
The Honorable James V. Hansen, Chairmen
Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans
The Honorable Wayne Gilchrest, Chairman
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
The Honorable Scott McInnis, Chairman
and
Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation and Public Lands
The Honorable George Radanovich, Chairman

by

Mr. John O'Keeffe
Adel, Oregon

March 14, 2002

Chairman Gilchrest, Chairman McInnis, Chairman Hefley and Distinguished Members of the House Resources Committee:

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, and the Public Lands Council (PLC), a non-profit organization representing over 27,000 federal grazing permittees, thank you for your interest in my comments concerning invasive species.

I am a member of NCBA, the PLC and the Oregon Cattlemen's Association (OCA). I also chair the Public Lands Committee of the Oregon Cattlemen's Association and PLC's Sage Grouse Committee. My wife and I, our two sons and my mother operate our family ranch in south central Oregon. We run our cow-calf operation on about 16,000 private deeded acres and lease about 200,000 acres from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the United States Forest Service (USFS). Therefore, I have a vested interest in what happens on my own land as well as how federal lands surrounding my private acreage are managed.

NCBA and PLC appreciate the attention the Committee has directed to invasive species issues and also appreciate the opportunity to speak to these joint subcommittees on H.R. 3558, the Species Protection and Conservation of the Environment Act. We have long been aware of the economic and environmental harm caused by invasive species and 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.

Our priorities for invasive species legislation are perhaps easier to articulate than they are to implement, but we nonetheless 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.

HR 3558 is important legislation, as it elevates the significance of invasives species and underscores the need for Congress to focus more attention on this issue. It strengthens the ability for Federal, State, and private entities to develop partnerships and coordinate activities, and also emphasizes rapid response to outbreaks of harmful nonnative species. We are encouraged by the efforts of this Committee to provide mechanisms for States and private landowners to manage all invasive species.

We do have several concerns with the legislation that I will summarize below:

HR 3558 is designed to provide grants to States for activities to protect, conserve, and restore native fish, wildlife, and their natural habitats on Federal lands. We are concerned that the legislation duplicates current programs and competes with on-going efforts that direct resources to problem areas not adequately addressed. Federal dollars are appropriated every year to fund programs that protect, conserve, and restore fish and wildlife and their habitats. For example, the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program directs funds for wildlife habitat restoration and we are concerned that HR 3558 may be duplicative of these efforts. Another example is the Department of Interior's Landowner Incentive Program (LIP). For FY 2003, the Department budgeted an additional \$10 million over last year's budget for a total budget request of \$50 million. The LIP provides landowners with technical and financial assistance to private landowners for habitat protection and restoration. Yet another example is the Cooperative Conservation Program, proposed funding for this program is \$50 million. This program offers grants to states for habitat protection, wetlands restoration and riparian area protection. Other examples where HR 3558 essentially duplicates current efforts of Department of Interior programs (and proposed funding amounts in the Department's FY 2003 budget request) include programs such as the North American Wetlands Conservation Fund (\$43.56 million), Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund (\$91 million), and the National Wildlife Refuge Fund (\$14.558 million). All these programs offer grants or funding to states, private landowners or federal agencies to protect, conserve or restore fish and wildlife habitats.

However, existing sources of funds for addressing invasive weeds do not come close to addressing the needs we are facing on public and private lands. There currently is no existing independent federal fund to address these needs. In BLM FY 2003 budget request, the agency plans to treat 245,000 acres. This acreage is the same as last year and 7,000 acres less than 2001's total acres. I find it interesting that for an agency responsible for managing 264 million acres of federal land – or nearly one-eighth of the country's landmass – only one acre out of every 1,078 acres will be treated. To me, this number is shocking. More federal dollars need to be allocated for treating more acreage. While the cattle industry recognizes the threats

posed by all invasive species and supports all efforts to manage them, our primary concern is the threat posed by invasive weeds. Weeds are also the invasives where I have the most personal experience, as reflected in this testimony.

The Federal Interagency Weed Committee has estimated that annual losses in the productivity of agricultural lands are as much as \$20 billion. These losses are personal to cattle producers -- so each of us has a vested interest in the health of the land that we own or manage and in minimizing financial impacts caused by invasive weeds. 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, we also need a programmatic environmental impact statement so the agencies can deal with all weeds at all times, rather than one at a time.

I have been involved with fighting non-native species, particularly noxious weeds, for about 20 years now. I helped organize our county's weed board, the Lake County Weed Board. In fact, I am still serving as vice chairman. The principle function of the weed board is to advise our county commissioners on weed management and what can be done to help fight the struggle. About five years ago, I also helped establish the Warner Weed Working Group. I still serve as the chair of this group. This group seeks to target weed control and eradication through cost-share efforts, education and awareness. My involvement also includes assisting landowners and other cattle producers by commenting on federal land management proposals to ensure non-native invasive species, such as noxious weeds, are adequately addressed in the proposed action.

As I stated earlier, I have been fighting weeds on my own land for over 20 years. I spray, learn what I can about control and management and even break out the shovel to eradicate weeds such as the Canadian thistle. But my individual efforts are not enough. In my area, we are currently facing invasions of whitetop, perennial pepperweed and Russian knapweed. If more effort, particularly federal funding, is not devoted to combat invasive species, we are all fighting a losing battle and rural communities such as my own will face severe economic crises.

If there is one thing I have noticed in all my years of fighting these non-native species is that if something is not done fast we will lose a lot of land that will never be recovered. For instance, fighting cheatgrass is a lost cause. One might as well try to empty the ocean with a bucket. Cheatgrass is a prime example of what can happen if proactive measures are not taken immediately.

The best method of fighting these invasions is to act locally. Currently, we have a limited amount of resources. In order to maximize resources, I have found that resources are best utilized by those who intuitively know the geography and flora of an area -- for instance, those who have been running up and down fields and ditches like myself and other members of my weed board and weed working group. Furthermore, we need to have additional funding diverted 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.

I feel HR 3558 fails to devote adequate resources to the local level and when HR 3558 provides resources to the local level, any effort is burdened with red tape and bureaucracy -- two things I find totally unnecessary in the fight against invasive species. In particular, for a project to qualify under Section 5(e), objectives include establishing a science-based restoration of fish and wildlife habitats. I am not a wildlife biologist but I feel this section requires expertise beyond my capability. My expertise comes from living on the land, working on the land, and nurturing the land in order to reach its highest sustainability. In other words, application of common sense local know how.

HR 3558 expands bureaucracy and red tape with the state assessment requirements of Section 4 and

places an additional burden on states. Many states currently have weed management programs and direct state dollars to local weed management boards. My own state of Oregon customarily follows this practice. My basic thoughts are we do not need more bureaucracy or red tape, or more government for that matter. What we need is more federal funding to get more money on the ground, using local folks, to attack the problem effectively.

Because invasive species know no boundaries, any Federal program must allow for funds to be directed where they are most needed. HR 3558 appears to limit use of funds to only those projects on State and private lands that are adjacent to Federal lands and also requires there be a Federal partner to be eligible for a grant under the Aldo Leopold Native Heritage Grant Program. NCBA and PLC believe 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.

One provision of HR 3558 I am particularly interested in is Section 7, the Rapid Response Capability to Harmful Non-native species. When it comes to fighting invasive species such as noxious weeds, I feel we need to attack the problem as if it were a wildfire, move resources into the problem area, eradicate the problem and don't leave until the threat is eliminated.

In closing, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and the Public Lands Council support the goals of HR 3558 and support the efforts of this Committee to address invasive species issues. However, we are concerned that HR 3558 will not adequately address the non-native invasive species problems, particularly noxious weeds. Nonetheless, we look forward to working with the Committee to ensure that our efforts to manage and control these harmful species are targeted in the most efficient manner possible. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before your committee. I will gladly answer any questions you may have.