

**Testimony of Kevin Sullivan, Maryland State Director of the
United States Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services Program
Before the House Resources Subcommittee on Fisheries,
Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans on H.R. 4044**

April 11, 2002

Mr. Chairman, my name is Kevin Sullivan and I am the Director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Wildlife Services program for Maryland, Delaware, and the District of Columbia. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you and the Subcommittee today on H.R. 4044, a bill that, if passed, would authorize the Secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior to provide assistance to the State of Maryland for the implementation of a program to eradicate nutria and restore marshlands damaged by this invasive species in the Chesapeake Bay area. While encouraged by H.R. 4044 and other bills introduced in Congress that address invasive species problems in the United States, the Administration has concerns with H.R. 4044 that will be discussed in the Department of the Interior's statement today. As you may know, Wildlife Services is currently engaged with Department of the Interior officials and several other local and State cooperators in a pilot program to determine if nutria eradication is a feasible goal in the Chesapeake Bay area.

Wildlife Services, a part of USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), is the Federal program charged with preventing or reducing conflicts between people and wildlife. Wildlife Services works closely with other Federal agencies--such as the Department of the Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service, the lead agency in the nutria pilot program--State and local officials, industry groups, university researchers, producers, and citizens to help prevent, minimize, or manage wildlife damage to a variety of different resources in the United States.

Wildlife Services is called on regularly by our cooperators to stop wild animals from damaging public property and natural ecosystems, threatening human health and safety, or preying upon threatened and endangered species. When wildlife damage management is necessary, Wildlife Services officials help to balance wildlife populations, prevent harmful situations from occurring again, and give residents advice about how they can minimize conflicts with wildlife.

In other important areas, our program helps to protect aircraft from birdstrikes and collisions with wildlife at airports across the country. Wildlife Services is also an integral part of efforts to prevent the brown tree snake, a non-native predator on the island of Guam, from further damaging fauna on the island and spreading to Hawaii via cargo shipments and other routes of commerce. In all of its work, Wildlife Services is recognized for its reliance on sound, environmentally sensitive methods of wildlife damage management and commitment to effective and affordable public service.

Wildlife Services prides itself on the close, cooperative relationships we have developed with our many partners in both the public and private ranks. The partnership that I would like to discuss with you today is the one we have entered into with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to address the damage associated with nutria populations on Maryland's Eastern Shore.

Invasive species are nonindigenous organisms that cause, or are likely to cause, harm to the environment,

plant and animal health, or public health if introduced into the country. Due to significantly increased levels of global commerce and travel, the number of pathways for the movement and introduction of foreign, invasive pests and diseases into the United States is currently at an all time high. This situation puts our country at risk, from public health to various agricultural industries to our native ecosystems. Estimated economic harm to the United States from biological invaders runs in the tens of billions of dollars and may exceed \$120 billion annually.

Historically, APHIS works to safeguard American agricultural resources and prevent damage to our natural ecosystems from the introduction and establishment of those invasive species that threaten the health of domestic plants and animals. These efforts ensure U.S. agricultural productivity and facilitate safe agricultural trade, help to preserve the environment, and, in many cases, protect U.S. public health.

In support of APHIS' safeguarding mission, Wildlife Services has been called on increasingly to address the damage associated with invasive species, like nutria, that have, or have the potential to, overrun natural ecosystems and impact native species. As we have just heard, nutria are prolific animals that are greatly impacting marshlands in the Chesapeake Bay area. Their nesting and foraging habits erode marsh vegetation in the Chesapeake Bay watershed and also affect birds, fish populations, and other valuable--and environmentally sensitive--species such as the blue crab.

In carrying out its mission of protecting ecosystems and preserving and enhancing wildlife populations, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Chesapeake Bay field office, in conjunction with State and local officials, university researchers, and environmental and fisheries groups, has been very much aware of the threat posed to the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem by nutria populations. In 1997, Fish and Wildlife Services officials developed--and Congress ultimately approved funding for--a three year pilot program to identify appropriate methods for controlling nutria and restoring degraded marsh habitat on Maryland's Eastern Shore. At the time of the pilot program's approval, Wildlife Services officials assisted their colleagues at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Chesapeake Bay field office in developing the environmental assessment documentation required for the pilot program to begin under the National Environmental Policy Act.

While personnel constraints prevented Wildlife Services from becoming directly involved in the early stages of the pilot program, communication on the nutria pilot program continued between Fish and Wildlife Service and my office in Maryland. As the program progressed, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials contacted me regarding Wildlife Services' participation in nutria control and eradication efforts on Maryland's Eastern Shore.

At the request of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials, I prepared a budget analysis of the staffing requirements necessary for Wildlife Services' participation in the pilot program. I determined that 13 positions--12 wildlife specialists and 1 wildlife biologist--would be necessary to carry out the capture, tagging, and reporting activities called for in the pilot program. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials have approved these positions and provided the Wildlife Services office in Maryland with sufficient funds for program activities in the coming year. An inter-agency agreement between Wildlife Services and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service facilitated this funding transfer and outlines Wildlife Services' new responsibilities as a cooperator in the nutria control pilot program.

Mr. Chairman, Wildlife Services officials have the education, background, and professional expertise necessary to target nutria populations and evaluate the effectiveness of control and eradication efforts. We are continuing to cooperate closely with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other involved landowners and officials in the pilot program. This collaborative approach will assist all of the parties in the future as

we evaluate our efforts, devise nutria management and eradication plans, and determine adequate funding for an appropriate strategy to combat nutria. I am confident that by working together and involving local residents, officials, and other pertinent groups we can make good strides against nutria and help to restore some of the damage already caused by this invasive species.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to testify before you and the Subcommittee today. I will now answer any questions you or your colleagues may have regarding Wildlife Services' involvement in the nutria pilot program in Maryland.

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