

Testimony By
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before the
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Resources
Subcommittees on
Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans
Forests and Forest Health
National Parks, Recreation and Public Lands

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Introduction

Messrs. Chairmen, I am Terry Z. Riley, Director of Conservation for the Wildlife Management Institute (WMI). The Wildlife Management Institute was established in 1911, and is staffed by professional wildlife scientists and managers. Our purpose is to promote the restoration and improved management of wildlife and other natural resources in North America.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to offer our insights on H.R. 3558, the Species Protection and Conservation of the Environment Act. The debate that will occur on invasive weeds is not a do or don't proposition. The economic viability of farms and ranches is dependent on a national, coordinated effort to control the spread of invasive weeds, and H.R. 3558 will serve as a catalyst to bring the affected parties together to ensure success. Production of wildlife, agricultural crops, and livestock already have been compromised, and farmers and ranchers are losing billions of dollars each year to weeds.

WMI commends all three Subcommittees for initiating this dialog. The seriousness of the invasive weeds issue cannot be overstated, and we urge the Subcommittees to complete work on H.R. 3558, or similar legislation, that will enable our country to begin aggressive and long-term control of invasive weeds.

We are concerned about the accelerating spread of invasive exotic plants, or "weeds", on public and private land. Some estimates indicate that exotic invasive plants are spreading at a rate of about 10,000 acres per day. The following examples of increased weed populations on private, state, and federal lands illustrate the devastation underway: In Montana spotted knapweed increased from a few plants in 1920 to 5 million acres

today; in Idaho rush skeleton weed went from a few plants in 1954 to 4 million acres today; in Northern California yellow starthistle increased from 1 million acres in 1981 to about 15 million acres today. Imagine how concerned and vocal ranchers, sportsmen, and environmentalists would be if 5 million acres of rangeland or backcountry had been bulldozed or paved, or locked up and lost for any human use. In many of these cases we are talking about destruction of land that will be very hard, if possible at all, to restore to its former condition. Our country has spent millions restoring the integrity of our waters under the Clean Water Act, but invasive weeds represent a challenge as great to that integrity as what we faced from water pollution. Thousands of watersheds on public and private land are undergoing the greatest permanent short-term degradation in their recorded history--with fish and wildlife habitat and livestock forage suffering the greatest losses.

Local cooperative approaches offer the best opportunity to prevent and control weeds within a specific watershed, particularly when they address problems identified in a State or regional assessment. In a few states, Weed Cooperatives or County Weed Boards are bringing land owners and operators, utility companies, county and state road departments, State fish and wildlife agencies, federal land management agencies, businesses, conservation organizations and public land users together to attack this insidious plague of weeds.

Federal and private funds through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's "Pulling Together Initiative" already are providing local cooperatives with the funds they need to develop and implement long-term plans to control invasive weeds within local watersheds. Over 200 weed control cooperatives have been supported by the "Pulling Together Initiative" since 1998, however, more than 250 weed cooperatives submitted project proposals to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation that went unfunded. A wide array of partners have contributed millions of dollars to these cooperative weed-control ventures, leveraging nearly 2 non-federal for each federal dollar committed to the program. The Wildlife Management Institute has been the grantee on one of these "Pulling Together Initiative" projects since 1998 that has brought together 14 federal, state, county and private partners to collectively control the spread of purple loosestrife up the Missouri River and its tributaries in Nebraska and South Dakota. These diverse groups enthusiastically come together to fight a common enemy. Unfortunately, in most areas and in most watersheds, these cooperative efforts to control and eradicate weeds are not yet in place, or have not been able to secure funding.

The technology is available to cooperatively bring the spread of invasive weeds down over the long term to a level approximating "no net increase"; along with making good progress at controlling and restoring some large infestations. However, the cost to apply and coordinate the delivery of this technology will not be low. Without substantial long-term federal funding that is leveraged with state and private resources, vast areas will become degraded permanently as these invasive weeds spread across our country.

Only now are we beginning to see the danger that lies ahead. There is great economic efficiency in increasing investments now to keep relatively healthy watersheds from becoming severely infested by weeds. Enormous increases in investments will be needed to restore land once it is seriously infested. With prompt action now, these disasters can be avoided, or at least effectively managed.

Over the past 2 years, our nation experienced some of the most devastating wildfires we have seen in some time; burning nearly 8 million acres and destroying immense amounts of public and private property. While most of those fires were ignited naturally by lightning strikes, the fuels that carried those fires often were invasive weeds, such as cheatgrass, that have invaded millions of acres of our western rangelands.

Congress immediately responded to these disastrous fires by allocating nearly 2 billion dollars in FY 2001 to aggressively deal with the wildfire hazards across the country on public and private land. While exotic invasive weeds do not destroy homes as do catastrophic wildfires, and thus do not receive the interest of the Press, they are doing just as much if not more permanent damage to the lives and livelihood of farmers and ranchers over a much larger area of our country.

Recommendations

House Bill 3558 lays the foundation to aggressively address the invasive weeds catastrophe, but we have a few concerns that you might consider as you continue to develop this legislation. Specifically, as your deliberations on H.R. 3558 proceed, we ask that you include provisions in the bill to provide--

- Sufficient and long-term funding on public and private land;
- A watershed-based approach to controlling weeds;
- Coordinated weed control projects on public and private land;
- Assurances that all nonnative invasive weeds are addressed;
- Requirements to leverage non-federal funds;
- Opportunities to fund multi-state weed control projects;
- Expanding the role of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation; and
- A primary focus on wildlife and fish species that are experiencing long-term declines, but are not yet listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

We strongly urge the Subcommittees to address the issue of annual and long-term funding needed to control invasive nonnative weeds on our Nation's public and private lands. Local cooperative efforts to control invasive nonnative weeds must have some assurances that funding will be available to help plan and implement their programs. Federal land management agencies also must have the funds to control weeds on our public lands, and there must be methods developed to ensure coordination between weed control efforts on public and adjacent private lands.

We strongly urge the Subcommittees to commit at least \$100,000,000 per year for nonnative invasive weed control projects on private land, and to commit at least 5 years of funding.

We also urge the Subcommittees to allocate sufficient funds to the federal land management agencies to control noxious weeds on public lands. For example, the Bureau of Land Management needs at least \$15 million in FY 2003 to implement their weed control program, and they will need at least \$30 million per year once the program is fully implemented. Congress provided \$8 million in FY 2001 to the USDA Forest Service to control invasive weeds on 150,000 acres, but already there are over 8 million acres of the agencies' 192 million acres that are infested by nonnative invasive weeds. Much more funding is needed to stop the spread of weeds on federal land.

We are concerned that H.R. 3558 may reduce funding for other natural resource programs within the Department of the Interior (DOI) in an attempt to balance the federal budget. However, without clearly identifying the source of funding (new money or transfer from other programs), we believe there will be attempts to raid existing wildlife programs within DOI. We recommend that H.R. 3558 clearly identify the source of funds necessary to protect and restore wildlife and fish habitats that have been impacted by invasive weeds.

Most successful efforts to control weeds have been those that address the problem within an entire

watershed. We recommend that the H.R. 3558 be modified to require that all programs and projects using federal dollars to control weeds must be based on a watershed planning and implementation approach.

There are many nonnative invasive weed control programs already in existence on public and private land. However, many of these programs do not bring together all private and public agencies, organizations and stakeholders to mount a coordinated effort to control weeds. Government funding for control of invasive weeds on private land traditionally has come from the various federal and state departments of agriculture. We are concerned that federal funding through the Secretary of the Interior might disrupt these traditional cooperative ventures. We recommend that the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture be equally involved in the planning and implementation of any nonnative invasive weed control program on public and private lands.

We are concerned that efforts to control invasive weeds might only focus on the widespread infestations in the western states. Our Nation's waterways often provide the avenues by which invasive weeds spread throughout a watershed, and many of our waterways (rivers, streams, lakes and wetlands) are completely choked and dysfunctional because of weed infestations. We urge the Subcommittees to address all nonnative invasive weeds in H.R. 3558, including those weeds in waterways, wetlands, farmlands, pasture and haylands and our western rangelands.

Almost all local agencies, organizations, and stakeholders are concerned about invasive weeds, and most are eager to commit their own time and resources to provide control. The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) has demonstrated that it can leverage millions of dollars from a wide array of private and public partners to control weeds through its Pulling Together Initiative. We recommend that H.R. 3558 recognize the proven model for leveraging private resources for weed control that has been successfully employed by the NFWF, and to continue to use the NFWF as an integral player in achieving the goal of promoting greater cooperation to control harmful weeds.

Often nonnative weeds infestations cross boundaries created between administrative, political and state entities. We are concerned that H.R. 3558 will not accommodate nor encourage cooperative efforts across all of these boundaries, such as a multi-state weed control project. We recommend that the H.R. 3558 provide funding to a broad array of cooperative ventures to control invasive weeds, including multi-state projects.

Finally, we are concerned that H.R. 3558 may not address adequately the effects of invasive weeds on fish and wildlife species that are in serious decline. The habitats of a large number of native fish and wildlife species are being destroyed by invasive weeds. Species like the sage grouse are in serious decline, but they are not yet threatened or endangered. Sage grouse are almost completely dependent on vast areas of sagebrush, but millions of acres of these habitats are being destroyed by invasive weeds. Without a clear focus on declining species in H.R. 3558, we are concerned that these native species will be overlooked in favor of those that are listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). We recommend that the purpose of H.R. 3558 be modified to include the objective of placing priority on restoring habitats of native fish and wildlife species that are in serious decline, but are not yet listed as threatened or endangered under the ESA.

Concluding Remarks

We thank the Chairmen and members of the Subcommittees for inviting the Wildlife Management Institute to testify on H.R. 3558. Economic losses to invasive weeds are staggering, and we are very concerned that wildlife and other natural resources will suffer irreparable harm if we do not act now. We fully support a

broad array of active and cooperative weed control ventures on public and private lands, particularly for native fish and wildlife habitats in serious decline. We believe significant and long-term funding is needed to assist these partnerships in controlling weeds within all of our Nation's watersheds. Funding for invasive weed control on our public lands is woefully inadequate to stop the spread of these insidious pests, but we would not support funding for any new weed control program that would be at the expense of other federal natural resource programs or existing cooperative weed control partnerships. Messrs. Chairmen, we respectfully request that our written and oral comments presented here today be entered into the permanent written record of this hearing.

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