



**Animal and Plant
Health Inspection Service**

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Remarks

Remarks as Prepared for Administrator Kevin Shea National Invasive Species Awareness Week (NISAW) Fair

WASHINGTON, DC, Feb. 25, 2016—Good afternoon. On behalf of Secretary Vilsack and the other USDA agencies that work on invasive species, thank you for taking part in this year's National Invasive Species Awareness Week (NISAW) event here on Capitol Hill.

I want to acknowledge the U.S. Departments of Commerce and Interior, which along with USDA co-chair the National Invasive Species Council (NISC).

In addition to our 54 Federal agency partners, we at USDA work on invasive species with dozens of State, local, academic, Tribal, and non-governmental organization (NGO) partners—some of which are represented in this room.

We have so many partners in this effort because we all need to cooperate and collaborate, on every level and in every part of the country, to combat the threat of invasive species effectively.

Invasive Species—Defining a Complex Threat

In 1999, Executive Order 13112 defined invasive species as “an alien species whose introduction does or is likely to cause economic or environmental harm or harm to human health.”

Alien species are, of course, species that are not native to a particular ecosystem. They can be plants, animals, or even bacteria and viruses.

Using this definition, the Zika virus, which has just appeared in Maryland, is an invasive species. But the European honeybee, which came to this country in colonial times, isn't, because it's generally considered to be more beneficial than detrimental to our agricultural system. Gray squirrels, which are native to the United States, are considered to be an invasive species in Britain, where they threaten and often out-compete the native red squirrels.

Since most of us think of an invasive species as an alien plant or animal that adversely affects our country's agriculture, forests, and natural resources, that's where I'm focusing my talk today.

Overall estimates of the negative economic impact of invasive species range in the many billions of dollars. And the damage they cause has the potential to personally affect everyone here today.

For instance, if you drank Florida orange juice this morning...the citrus psyllid, an invasive insect from Asia, is spreading a disease that's cut Florida's citrus harvest in half in just 4 years. The future of the entire citrus industry there and in other States is in jeopardy.

And if you value your neighborhood trees, you might want to know that the invasive emerald ash borer (EAB) has already killed tens of millions of ash trees in 25 States—including Maryland and Virginia.

The Spread of Invasive Species

Invasive species are putting our country's agriculture, forests, natural resources, animal and human health, and prosperity at risk. That risk is growing—in great part because it's easier for invasive species to get here and to spread.

Increased international travel, of course, provides potentially invasive species with more opportunities to enter the United States. Climate change can create conditions that are more favorable for these species, possibly broadening their range.

Then there's international trade and the double-edged sword it can present. As just one example, the invasive zebra mussel is believed to have come to us through the ballast water of ships arriving from abroad.

Certainly we at USDA want to expand international agricultural trade. It's good for our farmers, our consumers, our economy, and the world. It's USDA's job to figure out how to maximize the benefits of trade while minimizing the potential risks.

APHIS' Fight Against Invasives

Let's begin with my Agency, the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, or APHIS.

We're the front line of defense against agricultural invasives. We work hard to ensure that agricultural imports are free of invasive species before they ever get here, through preclearance programs abroad and careful risk assessments.

We also work with U.S. Customs and Border Protection at our Nation's ports of entry, including airports, to keep invasive "hitchhikers" from getting into our country on agricultural imports. And in cases where an animal or plant pest is confined to certain areas of the country, we work with States and industry to regulate the movement of host commodities to prevent further spread across State borders.

While we can't inspect every crate of imported fruits or vegetables, the scientific tools our experts use to gauge the risk such imports pose are sound and remarkably effective. We are always developing and enhancing those tools.

And if invasives somehow evade our prevention efforts, we're out in the field with our partners, conducting and financing early detection and rapid response operations. We also educate the public about invasive species through our Hungry Pests campaign, which reaches millions of people through TV and radio public service announcements, a Web site, and more. You can see some of these materials at the APHIS booth here.

Success Stories

Through cooperative agreements and many other mechanisms, we've worked with partners all over the country to successfully combat many invasives.

At the National Invasive Species Achievement Awards last year, I mentioned two success stories: the near-eradication of the boll weevil, a serious cotton pest, and the European grapevine moth, which once threatened California's vineyards and hasn't been detected at all for two seasons.

A priority for us now: feral swine. They carry diseases and damage crops, livestock, natural ecosystems, and property in more than 35 States, causing upwards of \$800 million in agricultural damage annually. In 2014, Congress gave APHIS \$20 million to establish a National Feral Swine Damage Management Program to control and, we hope, eradicate this invasive species.

Thanks to the hard work of the Federal and State feral swine programs and our cooperators, we're making progress. We believe we've eliminated feral swine in Idaho, Washington, New York, and Maryland; we're now working on confirming that. In some other areas, we have reduced feral swine populations to the point that farmers who had previously abandoned all attempts to grow crops have actually resumed planting.

I'd like to highlight some of the more creative ways we and our partners are getting our job done. We've made some headway fighting the Asian citrus psyllid I mentioned earlier by introducing a small parasitic wasp specifically to attack it. Populations of this psyllid in Texas have now decreased by 85 percent.

We're also assessing how effectively another kind of parasitic wasp can combat the ash-killing EAB. We've used detector dogs to confirm that we've successfully eliminated the population of nutria that once lived on the Delmarva Peninsula.

On Guam, the invasive brown tree snake had wiped out most native bird species. We made aerial drops of dead mice that each contained a tablet of the human painkiller acetaminophen, which is fatal to these snakes. USDA's project team won an award from the U.S. Department of Defense, which also provided funding for the effort. We've kept the remaining snakes from leaving the island, where once-endangered birds are coming back.

There's more. When Oregon and Washington detected unusually high numbers of Asian and European gypsy moths last year, we provided additional funding for eradication.

We're fighting in Hawaii and on Guam to limit the spread of the coconut rhinoceros beetle, which attacks coconut and other palms, and keep it from entering the continental United States.

We're completing a decades-long campaign to clear some Alaskan islands of non-native foxes that have reduced native bird populations. And we continue to contend with invasives like the Asian longhorned beetle, European starlings, spotted lantern flies, and more.

I want to stress that no progress comes easily. It requires considerable human and economic resources. At APHIS alone, we spend hundreds of millions of dollars each year to combat the invasives under our management and regulatory authorities.

Over at the APHIS booth, we're handing out a 1-page guide that highlights a number of the line items in the President's FY 2017 budget proposal that relate to APHIS' many efforts to prevent, control, and eradicate invasive species.

APHIS' USDA Partners

I've already mentioned some of USDA's external partners in the struggle against invasive species. I'd like to tell you a little bit more about what's being done internally.

At the departmental level, there's a program under the direction of USDA's Senior Invasive Species Coordinator to identify all invasive species that are causing extinction of endangered, threatened, and candidate species. USDA provides detailed information on each one of these species for the global Invasive Species Compendium, which is freely available to all.

USDA also collaborates with the Smithsonian Institution to document in the Compendium all invasive plant species that affect Caribbean island flora. This increases the opportunity for Caribbean managers to control or prevent the species on their islands, which helps prevent them from coming to the continental United States.

APHIS' sister agencies at USDA also play significant roles. Let me talk about a few.

The U.S Forest Service (FS), for instance, provides funding, technical assistance, research, and new technologies to support State agencies, private landowners, and other partners in fighting invasives. As just one example, the FS provides entomological and plant pathology expertise in implementing biological control efforts. It also provides comprehensive management policy on preventing and controlling the invasives that threaten our 193 million-acre National Forest System.

All of USDA's invasive species work depends heavily on the expertise of our colleagues in the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), who are constantly looking for ways to mitigate invasives by developing new early detection methods, treatments, biological controls, biopesticides, traps, and more. Among their many recent accomplishments,

ARS scientists and their collaborators completed a 6-year project that identified effective strategies to control the Asian tiger mosquito, which can transmit dengue fever, chikungunya, yellow fever, and the Zika virus.

USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) sets priorities for research on invasive species and provides funding opportunities for such research to university scientists and others through competitive grant programs. NIFA and the Cooperative Extension System support the eXtension Invasive Species Community of Practice, an Internet-based system that offers State officials, farmers, ranchers, and many others information and educational resources on invasive species.

I also want to mention USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). It provides technical and financial assistance to landowners in developing conservation plans, all of which include assessing the presence and/or risk of invasive species and mitigating their negative effects. With partners like APHIS, NRCS has also developed a multi-faceted plan to combat feral swine damage in Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Arkansas, and the Pacific Islands.

Conclusion

All of these activities are just some of what we all do in APHIS and elsewhere in USDA to keep invasive species at bay.

It's a never-ending task. But I believe that with targeted strategies, sufficient economic and human resources, and partners like those here with us today, we'll continue to make progress.

On behalf of us all, thank you again for coming. I appreciate your taking the time to learn more about our work combating invasive species. Please take a moment to visit the representatives of the various agencies and organizations here tonight.

Thank you.

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