

**Statement of
Mike Pool
Acting Deputy Director for Operations
Bureau of Land Management
U.S. Department of the Interior
Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests, and Mining**

Hearing to “*Examine the Impacts of Invasive Species on Productivity, Value & Management of Land & Water Resources*”

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on S. 2240, the Federal Invasive Species Prevention, Control and Management Act

April 28, 2016

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss invasive species management on public lands and to provide the Department of the Interior's views on S. 2240, the Federal Invasive Species Prevention, Control, and Management Act. Invasive species reduce rangeland productivity, increase the risk of wildfires, threaten native plant and wildlife populations and their habitats, and impact recreational opportunities on public lands. The Department shares the sponsor's goals of improving the management and control of invasive species on the lands and waters that it manages and appreciates changes made in the bill since similar legislation was introduced in the House in the 113th Congress. We would like to work with the sponsor and Subcommittee on amendments to resolve some concerns we have identified.

Background

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages over 245 million acres of public lands primarily located in 12 western states and is committed to preventing the introduction and spread of invasive species that threaten the nation’s economy, the environment, and in some cases human health directly. Many invasive plants, insects, and other types of animals, pathogens, and parasites are already well-established within the United States. Some of these organisms arrived hundreds of years ago, while others were introduced more recently. Invasive weeds like cheatgrass and salt cedar exist on over 79 million acres of BLM-managed lands and require significant effort to control.

The formidable challenges posed by invasive species must be addressed for the BLM to effectively protect and preserve natural, cultural, historic, and tribal resources; safeguard traditional uses of public lands; facilitate new economic opportunities; and build ecological resilience of plant and animal communities. Invasive species negatively impact the conservation of biodiversity, food and water security, grazing, outdoor recreation, and economic growth. The scale and globalization of trade, travel, and transport is on the rise, and there have been corresponding increases in the number and types of invasive species that are being moved around the world and the rate at which they are moving. Changes in land use and climate are rendering

some habitats, including some of the best-protected, most valuable and even remote natural areas, more susceptible to biological invasion.

Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation, Invasive Species, & Wildland Fire

A significant portion of public lands in the Great Basin region – including portions of Oregon, Idaho, Utah, Nevada, and California – is composed of the sagebrush-steppe ecosystem. This ecosystem is one of the most imperiled in the United States due in part to the presence of invasive species such as cheatgrass and medusahead. Together, invasive species and the effects of prolonged drought and climate change are creating conditions that are leading to larger, more intense rangeland fires across the Great Basin.

Cheatgrass, also known as “downy brome,” is a non-native annual grass that is of particular concern because it thrives in highly disturbed habitats, including those areas impacted by wildfire and other land-use activities. The spread of cheatgrass has been especially rapid in parts of the Intermountain West. The sagebrush steppe and bunchgrass regions in the Great Basin, Columbia Basin, and Snake River Plains in Nevada, Utah, Washington, Oregon, and Idaho have proven particularly vulnerable to cheatgrass invasion; the number and size of infestations in these regions has increased dramatically over the last 20 years.

Cheatgrass dries early in the summer and remains highly flammable throughout the fire season, which creates dangerous conditions on the ground. A wind-driven rangeland fire in cheatgrass can easily burn thousands of acres in an hour, destroying homes, livelihoods, and habitat along the way. If left unchecked, cheatgrass often invades sagebrush habitat after rangeland fires, creating conditions for more frequent, intense fires in the future. Native plant and animal communities are not well-adapted to these intense and frequent fires and can suffer significant declines. This in turn allows for more cheatgrass growth in following years. For these reasons, this “fire-and-cheatgrass cycle” is a particularly difficult challenge for land managers. As directed in the Department’s Integrated Rangeland Fire Management Strategy, the BLM has joined with fellow DOI bureaus, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, tribes, other federal, state, and local agencies, private industry, and various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to control current cheatgrass infestations, prevent new invasions from occurring, and restore disturbed habitats.

Healthy rangelands are more resistant to certain invasive species. Therefore, working to maintain rangeland health and – when necessary – stabilizing and restoring areas after fire is critical to successfully breaking the cheatgrass-fire cycle. The increasing frequency and intensity of rangeland fires, and the conversion of sagebrush ecosystems to invasive annual grasses pose major threats to ranchers, tribes, local communities, outdoor recreationists, energy developers, and others who depend on these lands and resources to sustain their livelihoods and quality of life. In 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service identified the invasion of non-native annual grasses (such as cheatgrass), coupled with the loss of habitat from the increased frequency and intensity of wildfire, as the primary threat to the greater sage-grouse in the Great Basin.

BLM Actions to Combat the Spread of Invasive Species

The key to invasive species control is addressing the threat in a comprehensive and coordinated manner. Prevention, early detection and rapid response, control, coordination, education and

outreach, research, and restoration are critical elements for effective management of invasive species. To prevent and control the various invasive species that impact BLM lands, the BLM partners with state and local government agencies, tribes, and the private sector. An example of this coordinated approach is through engagement with Cooperative Weed Management Areas (CWMAs). CWMAs help interested parties coordinate efforts and share expertise for managing invasive species in a defined area. By addressing invasive species in this manner, the BLM is able to leverage limited resources to counter the impacts of invasive species across the landscape.

The BLM played a key leadership role in the development of the first National Seed Strategy for Rehabilitation and Restoration that was announced in August 2015. This strategy was developed in coordination with the Plant Conservation Alliance, the Chicago Botanic Garden, fellow DOI bureaus, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, western states, and many other partner organizations. The primary goal of the strategy is to ensure that the right seed gets to the right place at the right time to more effectively restore viable and productive plant communities and sustainable ecosystems. The strategy will also guide ecological restoration efforts and make treated lands more resistant to fire, invasive species, and drought.

The BLM is implementing many projects on public lands across the west to combat the spread of invasive species. For example, in Colorado, the BLM has worked with The Nature Conservancy, the San Miguel County Weed Board, and other interested stakeholders since 2001 to remove over 30 miles of salt cedar and restore native vegetation along the San Miguel River. In 2005, the BLM launched the “Restore New Mexico” initiative to restore disturbed lands on a landscape scale. Through that effort, the BLM has worked with state and local partners to restore over 3 million acres of land across New Mexico that had been degraded by invasive species and woodland encroachment. In Oregon, the BLM has worked with volunteers and the U.S. Forest Service to reduce the acreage infested by nine species of noxious weeds along the Rogue River by 90 percent. Projects like these result in significant benefits, including more desirable recreating conditions; healthier habitat for native plants, fish and wildlife; decreased infestation on both private and public land downstream; and education opportunities with adjacent landowners and outdoor recreationists to address larger-scale invasive plant control efforts.

Further, as part of Secretary Jewell’s January 2015 Secretarial Order on Rangeland Fire Prevention, Management, and Restoration, the BLM is using innovative biopesticides to test control of cheatgrass, medusahead rye, and jointed goatgrass on 33 research plots (ranging from 11-50 acres each) located in 7 states. The BLM is working in partnership with the U.S. Geological Survey and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to evaluate the results of these treatments this fall. Depending on whether these treatments are successful, the BLM may expand this type of approach to additional states.

Early Detection and Rapid Response

Preventing the introduction of invasive species is the first line of defense against biological invasion. However, for invasive species that circumvent prevention systems, early detection and rapid response (EDRR) – a coordinated set of actions to find and eradicate potential invasive species before they spread and cause harm – can help stop the next invasive species from becoming established and spreading.

The White House Council on Climate Preparedness and Resilience recognized the impact that invasive species have on ecosystem resilience and identified EDRR as a priority in its October 2014 “Priority Agenda: Enhancing the Climate Resilience of America’s Natural Resources.” The report called upon the U.S. Department of the Interior, working with other members of the National Invasive Species Council (NISC) – an interdepartmental body created by Executive Order 13112 – states, and tribes to develop a national EDRR framework designed to identify and find invasive species populations while they are still localized and eliminate them before they become widely established and cause significant harm.

In response, the Department of the Interior played a leadership role together with the NISC Secretariat to facilitate the development of the interdepartmental report, “Safeguarding America’s Lands and Waters from Invasive Species: A National Framework for Early Detection and Rapid Response” (EDRR Framework), which the Department of the Interior released in February. NISC members’ departments and agencies assisted in the report’s development, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Department of Commerce, the Environmental Protection Agency, State Department, and Department of Defense. The process also engaged multiple and diverse stakeholders from state and tribal governments, academic institutions, and conservation organizations, among others.

The EDRR Framework proposes an organizational structure and guidance to better enable coordination and communication among federal and non-federal entities, ultimately to increase the overall effectiveness of EDRR efforts at all levels. The report contains a series of recommendations on initial high-level actions addressing coordination mechanisms, funding, partnerships, scientific and technical EDRR approaches, and pilot projects. The NISC Secretariat is in the process of charting out immediate next steps and identifying the human and financial resources available to take them. In addition, the President’s FY 2017 budget includes \$1.5 million for the Department of the Interior to begin implementation of the EDRR Framework, which would strengthen EDRR capacities.

Department Comments on S. 2240

As indicated at the beginning of this statement, while the Department supports the goals of this legislation to support federal efforts to address invasive species across public lands and waters in coordination and cooperation with states, tribes, and other non-federal partners, we have identified areas in the bill where additional clarity and further discussion with the sponsor and subcommittee would be helpful.

Section 4(b) would require the Department and the U.S. Forest Service to develop plans to achieve, to the maximum extent practicable, an annual five percent net reduction of invasive species populations on Interior and Forest Service managed lands. The Department agrees that setting metrics for control is important but those metrics will vary across species, their populations, ecosystems, and time. They are also informed by knowledge of baseline distributions. We would like to work with the sponsors on language to maintain administrative flexibility to allow agencies to prioritize actions to address the most harmful species and adapt to new challenges on the lands they manage.

We also note that the bill requires a number of additional plans, analyses, reports, and agreements which would be administratively burdensome to carry out and, in some cases, redundant in light of a number of existing cooperative agreements, contracts, and other arrangements we have made with our partners. We look forward to working with the sponsor and the subcommittee to identify those areas where there may be redundancies to ensure that ongoing work can be carried out most efficiently.

Section 5 of the bill establishes program funding allocations for control and management activities, investigations, outreach and public awareness, and administrative costs. The Administration does not support establishing fixed funding percentages into law which would reduce the land management agencies' discretion and flexibility to most effectively and efficiently allocate resources to address evolving challenges posed by invasive species. Because the most cost effective and efficient approach to managing invasive species is to prevent their establishment in the first place, we are particularly concerned that this section, as drafted, would limit the existing ability of land management agencies to adaptively manage invasive species control efforts while also meeting prevention, research, restoration, and partnership goals. Similarly, prevention, early detection, and control efforts for invasive species are informed, improved, and made more efficient through applied research, and we are likewise concerned that this section, as drafted, would limit the existing ability of land management and research agencies to conduct research to meet management goals.

Finally, the Department is also concerned that the environmental, cultural, and other impacts of invasive species control activities would not be adequately considered given the bill's broad categorical exclusion for many invasive species control efforts from environmental analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The Department does not support such an expansive categorical exclusion, which would both eliminate an important opportunity for public involvement in land management decisions and ignore existing regulatory authority to conduct programmatic NEPA reviews.

Conclusion

The Department appreciates that S. 2240 provides additional recognition of the importance of controlling invasive species on federal lands managed by its bureaus. We look forward to working with Congress to more successfully fight the spread of invasive species and maintain healthy landscapes. Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to testify on our efforts to combat the spread of invasive species and provide our views on the bill. I would be happy to answer any questions.