

The Honorable Albert Gore, Jr.
The Vice-President of the United States
Office of the Vice-President
Old Executive Office Building
Washington, DC 20501

Dear Vice-President Gore:

We write as a group of scientists, agricultural officials, and environmental experts to request your assistance in, and support for, the formation of a commission whose purpose would be to recommend new strategies to prevent and to manage invasions by harmful exotic species.

A rapidly spreading invasion of exotic plants and animals not only is destroying our nation's biological diversity but is costing the U.S. economy hundreds of millions of dollars annually. Biological invasions produce severe, often irreversible impacts on agriculture, recreation, and our natural resources. In some instances, they even have major human health consequences. The 21st century holds the clear threat of further devastating invasions unless a coordinated national effort is established.

In March, 1993, twenty-five distinguished scientists and resource managers wrote to you identifying the need for an effective national program to combat invasions by nonindigenous plants and animals. You kindly replied that these issues indeed concern your office, and we were pleased to note that these problems had received your attention.

Since 1993, biological invasions by pest and nuisance species from foreign nations, and from one part of the United States to another, have continued almost unabated:

- * Recent studies reveal, for example, that San Francisco Bay is invaded by a new exotic species on the average of once every twelve weeks.
- * At least 1.5 million acres in Florida have been invaded by nonindigenous plants, leading to a severe reduction in available native habitat.
- * Foreign weeds are spreading on Bureau of Land Management lands at over 2,300 acres per day and on all western public lands at approximately 4,600 acres per day.
- * Approximately 250 plant species meeting the Federal Noxious Weed Act's definition of a noxious weed remain unlisted and can still be legally imported into the U.S.
- * In the Mississippi drainage basin, species richness is expected to decline by 50% within a decade because of zebra mussel spread.
- * Exotic species invasion have contributed to the decline of 42% of U.S. endangered and threatened species.

Although the National Invasive Species Act of 1996 was an important step forward, the overall national effort to confront this crisis remains inadequate; it is primarily piecemeal, ad hoc, and reactive. For example, more than 20 federal agencies deal with invasive exotic species, but their policies and actions are uncoordinated and largely ineffective. There is not even a comprehensive database on the problem. Innumerable state agencies and private organizations also operate in this arena, often entirely unaware of one another's problems and actions. Actions

of various managers even inadvertently conflict with one another. Simply coordinating this effort would not only enhance its effectiveness but save millions of federal, state, and private dollars.

A commission could consider many potential ways of respond to this problem. One can imagine, for example, a center analogous to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a high-level government office (like that of the Surgeon General) that might serve as a bully pulpit on this issue, a much-expanded and well-funded interagency task force, and numerous other possibilities. What is most urgent is to begin a high-level consideration of possible responses, as the situation is deteriorating every day. We are losing the war against invasive exotic species, and their economic impacts are soaring. We simply cannot allow this unacceptable degradation of our nations' public and agriculture lands to continue.

The cogent 1993 report of the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment, Harmful Non-Indigenous Species in the United States, on the extraordinary economic and health costs to this nation of exotic invasions, provides an excellent introduction to these issues. Please contact Don C. Schmitz (904-488-5631), James T. Carton (860-572-5359), Daniel Simberloff (904-644-6739), or Phyllis Windle (301-345-8516) for more information about this growing problem.

We look forward to your response to this critical matter, and we offer any assistance you may need in further developing a strong and committed response to this national problem.

/signed/
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