

**Testimony of Scott A. Sutherland, Director of the Governmental Affairs Office
Ducks Unlimited
Before the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife & Oceans
Concerning the Refuge Ecology Protection, Assistance, and Immediate Response Act
June 21, 2007**

Madam Chairwoman and Members of the Subcommittee, my name is Scott Sutherland. I am the Director of the Governmental Affairs Office for Ducks Unlimited (DU). DU was founded 70 years ago by concerned and farsighted sportsmen-conservationists. It has grown from a handful of people to an organization of over 1,000,000 supporters who now make up the largest wetlands and waterfowl conservation organization in the world. Since 1937, DU has conserved nearly 12 million acres of wildlife habitat in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. We pride ourselves on our cooperative conservation work with federal and state agencies, cities and local communities, tribes, other conservation organizations, and thousands of private landowners throughout North America in the interest of wetlands conservation.

Ducks Unlimited is pleased to testify before the House Natural Resources Committee in support of expanded efforts to control and manage aquatic and terrestrial invasive species on National Wildlife Refuges (Refuges) and associated habitats. Invasive species pose a serious threat to wetland and grassland habitats that are important for waterfowl and other wildlife. Infestation by invasive species results in numerous negative impacts such as the displacement of native flora, increased erosion, degradation of wildlife habitat, and the alteration of soil chemistry.

We commend Congressman Kind and the co-sponsors of H.R. 767 for recognizing the significance of this habitat issue and for proposing a collaborative strategy to resolve this national problem. DU strongly supports efforts to facilitate partnerships to remove harmful non-native species and improve habitat on Refuges and nearby areas. This can be accomplished through biological, chemical, and/or physical control mechanisms. DU is actively working with Refuges across the country to combat invasive species, and there are many other examples of multi-sector partnerships that are achieving positive results.

We support efforts to build on these models and strengthen the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's efforts to formalize a sustained, landscape-scale approach to manage the threat of invasive species. An important lesson can be learned from the success in controlling purple loosestrife, an invasive species that can be extremely destructive to wetlands. Research on biological control of the species began in the early 1980's and today the plant is well under control in all regions with insects that use purple loosestrife as their natural food source.

Ducks Unlimited and CropLife America have established a five-year partnership to expand the use of plant science technology in the restoration and management of habitat for the benefit of waterfowl and other wildlife. CropLife America represents the developers, manufacturers, formulators and distributors of plant science solutions for agriculture and pest management in the United States. Our Wildlife Conservation/Technology Initiative with their members has expanded the involvement of crop technology (both the number and volume of products, and the number of companies) used for the improvement and protection of wildlife habitat across North America. By contributing herbicides, fungicides, and technical assistance, the member

companies of CropLife America are working with Ducks Unlimited to manage invasive weeds and enhance natural habitat in key waterfowl landscapes across the United States.

Some of the most aggressive invasive species in priority habitat areas for waterfowl include Perennial Pepperweed, Saltwater Cordgrass, Canada Thistle, and Common Reed (*Phragmites*). The following examples illustrate our ongoing efforts and future interest in partnering with Refuges and other land managers to improve habitat by addressing the challenges of invasive species:

Saltwater Cordgrass, or *Spartina*, is an invasive species that has harmed about 15,000 acres of intertidal mudflats in Willapa Bay in Washington, primarily on the Willapa Bay National Wildlife Refuge. *Spartina* eliminates the value of the intertidal area for wildlife, the aquaculture industry and recreational pursuits because it forms dense, monotypic stands of vegetation, traps sediment and alters hydrologic processes. DU has worked with a large number of public and private partners to complete significant restoration projects on the Willapa Refuge that have benefited pintails, other ducks, shorebirds, and salmon; however, those projects are jeopardized by the continued invasion of cordgrass. Herbicide application is accomplished by airboats and other machinery equipped with high volume sprayers for seedlings and precision spraying for large meadows. Large quantities of herbicide have been used to effectively control this plant to date, but additional resources are needed to fully address the problem in all important areas of the Refuge System.

Perennial pepperweed is invading uplands and, in some cases, wetlands throughout the western United States. Critical problem areas include northeastern California, southern Oregon, and recently the historic waterfowling area of the Suisun Marsh near San Francisco. Pepperweed inhibits and out-competes native plants, destroying nesting habitat and foraging areas. In California, DU has worked with the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex, Los Banos Wildlife Management Area, and private landowners to control pepperweed to improve habitat for wintering and migrating waterfowl, sandhill cranes and shorebirds, as well as migrating and breeding neotropical landbirds. DU is also working with Malheur NWR in Oregon and Stillwater NWR in Nevada to address habitat degradation caused by pepperweed.

Common Reed, or *Phragmites*, is a tall, woody grass that has invaded wetlands along the entire east coast and Great Lakes region. It mainly grows in brackish and tidal fresh water wetlands where it forms clones that mainly propagate through underground stems or rhizomes. In nutrient rich areas such as tidal marshes, this allows common reed to out compete native plant species for both nutrients and light. Thick stands of *Phragmites* form nearly impenetrable barriers to the movement of animals and large birds including waterfowl, shorebirds, and wading birds, which result in a degradation of habitat and a decline in the diversity of bird species utilizing a marsh.

In the past, DU has worked with Ninigret and Trustom Pond NWR and adjacent landowners in Rhode Island to control phragmites. Similar work has been completed by DU and other partners at Detroit River International NWR in Michigan, Parker River NWR in Massachusetts, Bombay Hook NWR in Delaware, Blackwater NWR in Maryland, and Wertheim NWR in New York.

Adequate control of phragmites typically requires multiple efforts including herbicide, mowing and spot treatments. However, scientists have concluded that current control methodologies are unable to control the plant long-term or prevent future expansion. Exploration and implementation of biological control is anticipated to reduce the invasiveness of phragmites and restore diverse native communities.

Several grassland weed species, including Canada thistle and leafy spurge, threaten areas of the waterfowl breeding grounds of the Prairie Pothole Region of North and South Dakota, Iowa, Minnesota, and Montana. Raptors, shorebirds and songbirds also nest in this region that is made up of diverse wetland-grassland complexes on both public and private lands. Grassland-nesting birds of all species benefit from a diverse and healthy grassland plant community. If quality habitat is not available, birds may suffer higher nest mortality because the nests are more easily discovered by predators. Invasive weedy plants will out-compete native plant species, and the habitat may then become a monotypic stand.

Herbicides are a critical control technique used to reduce the abundance of exotic grasses and other weeds at sites where DU seeks to restore and protect native grasslands. A key challenge in native grassland restoration is to suppress the production of exotic annual weeds long enough for the native grasses to establish themselves. Because many native grasses are perennials, once established they can persist for decades with proper management. To ensure the long-term health of the prairie habitat, it is important that all Refuge lands, including Waterfowl Production Areas and easements administered by the Service, be eligible for control projects under a new grant program as proposed by H.R. 767.

As is evident by virtue of some of our examples, there is significant potential for the non-profit and private sector to work cooperatively with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), state fish and wildlife agencies, tribes, and private landowners to control invasive species. As with other Service programs, non-profit organizations often serve as a liaison to non-federal entities, including private landowners, in their efforts to restore and protect wildlife habitat. With regard to the proposed legislation, this partnership model should be encouraged by clarifying that non-profit organizations are eligible to receive grants. We are also concerned that, as written, the monitoring aspect of the eligibility requirements could potentially discourage involvement by private landowners.

DU supports the factors for selection of projects and we believe there is potential to leverage federal funds with a considerable amount of private funds through a new matching grant program. It is important to strengthen existing partnership efforts and use them as a model to develop new and cost-effective strategies to address invasive species on Refuges and adjacent lands. As noted, DU is actively working with the Service to control invasive species on state lands, Refuges, and surrounding habitats across the country and we stand ready to work as a partner to expand these efforts in the future. A healthy Refuge system is essential to the future of waterfowl and we appreciate the Subcommittee's continued interest in protecting this important federal system of lands dedicated to wildlife. Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have.