Testimony of Dr. Jim Butler
Deputy Under Secretary for
Marketing and Regulatory Programs
U.S. Department of Agriculture

Before the Subcommittee on Department Operations,
Oversight, Nutrition, and Forestry
U.S. House of Representatives
October 2, 2002

Thank you. I am pleased to be here on behalf of the U.S. Department of Agriculture to discuss invasive species in the United States.

We do not need to spend a lot of time this morning discussing the dangers inherent in invasive species, those injurious animals, (micro) organisms, and plants that have the ability not only to survive, but to *thrive* in new environments. The examples on display in the hall outside this hearing room speak for themselves: exotic insects, voracious mammals, a sleek predatory snake, colorful plants that can grow quickly and overwhelm ecosystems. That many of these species are already here in the United States, or are being kept at bay nearby, highlights the fact that in today's world, invasive species have the means to move quickly from one habitat to another. To understand how this is possible, we simply need to trace the routes that international travelers and cargo follow on a daily basis. As one of the USDA posters here today reminds us, "Not All Alien Invaders Are From Outer Space." We know that these invaders may try to hitch a ride in travelers' suitcases or agriculture produce bound for U.S. markets.

USDA has several programs to respond to the threat of invasive species by preventing their entry into the country. Among these programs are phytosanitary agreements with other countries to either prohibit imports from areas in which a disease may be prevalent or to require treatments to mitigate the potential of an infestation. USDA also may implement preclearance inspections of imports at foreign ports, before they even arrive in the U.S. Finally, APHIS' Agricultural Quarantine and Inspection Program, which is proposed for inclusion in the new Department of Homeland Security has between 3,500 and 4,000 inspectors working to prevent the entry of articles that can endanger U.S. agriculture through inspections of people, cargo and modes of transport at U.S. borders

The increased number of pathways available to invasive species jeopardizes our country in numerous ways, from public health to the economy to our native ecosystems. Let's look at some basic facts. The estimated economic harm to the United States from biological invaders runs in the tens of billions of dollars and may exceed $120 billion annually. The reported number of cases of West Nile virus in birds, horses, and humans has risen dramatically each year since the disease was first confirmed in the northeastern United States. The Asian longhorned beetle remains a problem in the New York City and Chicago areas. Various introduced weeds, in combination, consume some 3 million acres of U.S. land every year. Nutria are responsible for the loss of marsh grasses in the Chesapeake Bay. And plant diseases, such as plum pox virus and citrus canker, threaten important domestic industries that employ thousands and are inextricably linked to State economies.

Quite obviously, the Federal Government must deal with the problem of invasive species in a strategic manner. The risks are simply too great for any other approach. For this reason, the National Invasive Species Council was created through an Executive Order in 1999 to help plan for future challenges and coordinate prevention and response efforts across the country.

The Council, co-chaired by USDA and the Departments of Commerce and Interior, coordinates the work of involved Federal agencies, ensuring that resources are used wisely and that our experts are consulted regularly. It helps Federal agencies communicate not only with each other, but with members of the public, industry groups, and State and local officials. The most important tool at the Council's disposal is its invasive species management plan. Developed and regularly fine-tuned by participating Federal agencies, the plan keeps involved officials on the same page and in contact with one another. National in scope, it is a blueprint that not only steers Federal efforts, but also helps us remain flexible and responsive to new situations.

For its part, USDA provides the Council with expertise in the areas of invasive species prevention, emergency response, control, and scientific research. These are some of the things that we do best, and we have refined our efforts in these areas over many years. Let me give you some examples.

The primary focus of our Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is to protect American agriculture. APHIS' activities are commonly referred to as our "safeguarding system" and encompass a broad range of efforts, including inspections, surveys, and pest and disease eradication programs. In other areas, the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) provides USDA with the latest innovations and technological breakthroughs in the field of pest management. ARS cooperates extensively with university and private partners to conduct research on a wide variety of pests. Agencies like the Forest Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service are focused on taking care of our Nation's environmental resources. The Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES) supports not only these and other USDA agencies at the local level with outreach efforts, but University research programs as well. In addition, CSREES is working along with APHIS right now to bolster our Nation's diagnostic laboratory infrastructure—a critical initiative with regard to homeland security *and* our ongoing vigilance against foot-and-mouth disease and other exotic diseases of concern.

These specialized agencies have distinct missions, but they all work toward one primary goal of protecting the nation's agriculture and food supply. Addressing invasive species is a large and multi-faceted part of this task, but USDA works to coordinate efforts and present a unified front. Agency personnel share information and resources and reduce repetitive activities. We support research that gives us new tools to improve our prevention and response programs. And we are considering new approaches to longstanding problems.

As a case in point, in the fight against invasive pests we realize that community groups and residents are some of our strongest allies. USDA and our cooperators can't be in every neighborhood, every forest, every park simultaneously looking for exotic pests. Each extra pair of eyes, then, that we can rely on to look for signs of plant disease, strange-looking insects, or exotic weeds are an invaluable asset to our surveillance programs.

In the recent homeland security supplemental funding package, USDA received additional funding to support pest detection activities. We have distributed this money to the States so they can help us improve the infrastructure needed to organize, coordinate, manage, and facilitate pest detection surveys at the State level. The objective of this pest detective initiative is to educate and enlist the cooperation of appropriate nongovernmental groups—gardeners, tree wardens,

university diagnostic laboratories, and nature conservancies—to be on the lookout for exotic and indigenous plant pests and diseases. Because these groups are on the front lines, they will likely prove more efficient and effective in detecting signs of pests and diseases at the field level.

In conjunction with expanded surveillance for invasive pests, we acknowledge the absolute necessity of being able to respond to serious pest and disease detections in a swift and coordinated manner. USDA has specific emergency response guidelines for many of the invasive plant and animal pests or diseases that pose a significant threat to the United States, including foot-and-mouth disease, bovine spongiform encephalopathy, and some exotic fruit flies. We've developed these response plans in conjunction with our Federal, State, and local partners and even conducted exercises to test our preparedness. To ensure maximum speed and effectiveness, we have rapid response teams stationed around the country ready to travel to detection sites to coordinate Federal, State, and industry containment and eradication efforts.

Along these same lines, USDA is working right now to fill the gaps in contingency planning for detections of invasive species that may occur in natural or remote areas of the country, places that are difficult to access or located away from our routine monitoring and surveillance efforts. Again, to protect the environment, the public health, and agricultural industries, it is essential that we monitor for and respond swiftly to *all* invasive species introductions. As we've learned, the risk of spread and damage to our resources is too great for us not to be prepared.

Now, while USDA has worked hard to ensure that we have the infrastructure, tools, and support necessary to address invasive species in today's world, there are some instances when we find ourselves challenged by an unforeseen problem. We've heard here today that problems involving invasive species can be, at times, extraordinarily complex, cutting across not only geographic but agency boundaries. Another complication is that in some cases we lack the knowledge to properly look for and eradicate new invasive species. In these situations, Federal officials must oftentimes balance quick response with patience and planning. Emergency research also needs to be made a priority and incorporated into response plans to give officials the information and tools necessary to do their jobs. And, most importantly, the interests and needs of those most affected must always remain in focus.

A few weeks ago, I traveled to Detroit to visit nearby areas affected by the emerald ash borer, an exotic forest pest recently discovered in Michigan and portions of Canada. This pest, a relative of the Asian longhorned beetle, demonstrates the frustration that can be brought about by invasive species. Many years ago, after the exotic Dutch elm disease wiped out trees across the country, ash trees were planted in backyards, forests, and parks. Many of these trees have reached the size of the elms they replaced, and now *another* invasive species threatens them. Officials with the Forest Service and APHIS are working closely right now with State and local representatives in Michigan to determine just how widespread emerald ash borer is, where it came from, and what we can do to stop its spread. Dave Tenny, my colleague here from the Forest Service, will talk more about the emerald ash borer in a few moments.

Another example of a challenging situation involving an invasive species is the coqui frog in Hawaii. This small, invasive frog has become established in areas of the State, much to the displeasure of many residents, tourists, biologists, and agricultural producers. However, at the same time, the frog is beloved in its natural home of Puerto Rico, and animal rights groups have objected to efforts to address its presence in Hawaii.

In working to develop an effective and environmentally sound approach to controlling the coqui frog in Hawaii, USDA discovered that caffeine, delivered in a spray, is successful in controlling the frog. Working closely with the Environmental Protection Agency, USDA helped to secure a permit for the State of Hawaii to use caffeine spray in limited situations, bringing some degree of relief to residents and producers. This permit, however, is set to expire soon, and USDA is currently involved in consultations with local, State, and Federal officials to determine an appropriate course of action.

USDA appreciates the Committee's interest in not only our programs to address invasive species, but also the problems we regularly face in responding to new situations, working with new partners, and taking into consideration different interests and viewpoints. As USDA's point person for invasive species, I am learning much in these areas as well, and I look forward to working with the Committee in the future. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today.