

## TESTIMONY

For the House Subcommittee on Insular Affairs

Oceans and Wildlife Hearing

On

The Nutria Eradication and Control Act of 2009

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On behalf of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, I would like to express our support for the Nutria Eradication and Control Act of 2010. The Act will authorize critically needed funding to finish the highly successful nutria eradication and wetland restoration program in Maryland, and to assist the States of Louisiana, Delaware, Oregon, Virginia, and Washington in developing and implementing similar proven programs.

The Chesapeake Nutria Project is one of a small number of successful exotic invasive species programs in the United States. Since the eradication phase of the project began in 2002, the project has eradicated nutria from over 130,000 acres of wetland habitat in Dorchester, Wicomico, Somerset, Talbot, and Caroline Counties in Maryland.

As nutria populations peaked, this invasive rodent destroyed 7000 acres of tidal marsh at Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. Total marsh loss for the Chesapeake is much larger, but difficult to quantify. In the late 1990's, a partnership of 27 Federal, State, and private organizations began to investigate the potential for eradicating nutria in Maryland. Beginning in 2000, Federal funding was obtained to initiate a study to develop an eradication strategy and begin to apply that strategy to the eradication of nutria in Maryland. In late 2002, the study phase was complete and eradication measures began in earnest. The project is overseen by the Nutria Management Team, consisting of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Chesapeake Bay Field Office (CBFO), USFWS CMNWRC, U.S. Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services (APHIS/WS), the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (MDNR), the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), the University of Maryland Eastern Shore (UMES), and Tudor Farms Inc.

Since September of 2002, the Chesapeake Nutria Project has removed over 13,000 nutria from Chesapeake bay coastal marshes, resulting in the protection of approximately 150,000 acres of federal, state and privately owned marshland from further degradation. This effort is currently

being accomplished by 20 full time staff including: 16 eradication specialists, a maintenance mechanic, a part time administrative assistant, a wildlife biologist, an assistant supervisor and a project leader. Together, this team of professionals implements the largest mainland invasive species eradication campaigns in the United States.

The economic and ecological health of the Chesapeake Bay and Delmarva coastal region is closely tied to the health of coastal wetlands. In addition to the ecological impacts, the destruction of wetlands by nutria is costing the Maryland economy \$4 million per year resulting from the degradation of agricultural lands, commercial fisheries, water quality, recreational opportunities, and property. An independent economic report estimates that by 2050 the economy will lose \$30 million per year if nutria destruction of wetlands is left unchecked.

The effort thus far has demonstrated that eradication is achievable. Now is the time to bring the resources to bear to complete the eradication effort in order for the tidal marshes of the Delmarva Peninsula to be saved and restored. Once nutria are removed, previously infested marshlands have shown a remarkable ability to recover from their effects. Without a continued effort to eradicate nutria from the Delmarva Peninsula they will re-infest areas already trapped and continue to destroy wetlands throughout the region.

In order to fully eradicate nutria from the region, it will be necessary for the project to continue to expand into the remaining five southern Maryland Eastern Shore counties, the Virginia portion of Delmarva, and Delaware. Through this effort, more than 400,000 acres of wetlands will be protected.

Nutria have become established in 17 states throughout the Southern and Northwestern US and cause significant problems for agriculture, aquaculture, nurseries, roads and flood control systems, wetlands, riparian habitats and stream restorations affecting salmon spawning habitat in the Pacific Northwest. The techniques developed and applied on the Chesapeake Bay eradication project can be applied elsewhere to effectively manage nutria populations and the resulting damages. Even where eradication may not be feasible, these methodologies can be applied to achieve targeted control to protect sensitive resources.

Based on the project's accomplishments to date, the eradication plan, and the magnitude of the job ahead, we estimate that the project will require a sustained yearly budget of \$2 million annually for approximately five more years through FY2014. This should enable us to maintain our current level of effort and accomplish eradication as planned by 2013.

The funding provided by the Nutria Control Act of 2009 is extremely important in our effort to finally eradicate nutria in Maryland. Moreover, the nature of invasive species control – particularly in the case of the incredibly fecund and adaptable nutria – is that if the program is not brought to completion all of our previous collective efforts and expenditures will have been for naught. Unless we see the task through and remove the second-to-last nutria from the Chesapeake, we will fail – at tremendous cost to the Chesapeake Bay Ecosystem and the people who depend upon it for employment, seafood, recreation, and regional pride.