

Ricardo Ortega, General Manager, Grassland Water District
Testimony to the House Agricultural Committee
Subcommittee on Livestock and Foreign Agriculture

Safeguarding American Agriculture from Wild, Invasive, and Non-Native Species
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Chairman Costa, Ranking Member Rouzer, Members of the Committee

My name is Ricardo Ortega, and I am the General Manager of the Grasslands Water District in California. Located in Merced County, we are a federal contractor that conveys water to wetland habitat on state, federal and private wildlife refuges in the Grassland Ecological Area. The wetlands in the Ecological Area make up the largest remaining block of freshwater wetlands in the West. Encompassing over 300 square miles, this habitat and surrounding wildlife beneficial agriculture such as alfalfa, cotton, corn, wheat and irrigated pasture support hundreds of wildlife species and millions of migratory birds each year. With less than 10% of historical wetlands remaining in California, the Ecological Area is recognized by international treaty as one of the most important wetland ecosystems in the Americas.

The Ecological Area is also the epicenter of California's nutria epidemic. Since their re-discovery in 2017, 758 nutria have been taken, with many more documented, at 200 sites across the San Joaquin Valley. The vast majority of nutria taken to date have been from within my District's service area, but they have now expanded to four counties, and threaten to spread further.

Nutria reach sexual maturity at 4 months of age and can have 40 offspring each year. They consume a quarter of their body weight per day but destroy 10 times the plant biomass by foraging exclusively on the fleshy bases of vegetation, reversing hundreds of millions of dollars in restoration efforts and potentially impacting agricultural revenue.

The Ecological Area shares a water conveyance system with agricultural districts through vulnerable earthen lined canals. Nutria burrows extend hundreds of feet causing levee failure and the loss of scarce water supplies, the lifeline of our precious remaining ecosystems and agricultural economy. Merced County alone is a \$3.2 billion dollar Ag economy, with over 100 types of crops grown on over 1.1 million acres, and nutria threaten its very existence.

Water and wildlife agencies in California fear nutria expansion North could devastate the Sacramento San Joaquin Delta system. In Louisiana, nutria convert 2,000 acres of marsh land into open water each year and have compromised the water conveyance infrastructure. This would not only impact the ecosystem, but the hub of the state's flood control and water delivery system which also supplies water to 25 million people. We must act now to prevent catastrophic outcomes in California.

In 2018, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife has taken the lead on eradicating nutria in California. The Department's emergency response has made great strides in slowing the

growth of the nutria population while long-term resources are pursued for a formal, dedicated eradication effort. Through a one-time State appropriation and grants, they established a Nutria Eradication Program that is expanding to 45 staff, including 5 contracted specialists through U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services. This effort also seeks to evaluate and utilize all effective detection tools, including the use of scent-detection dogs, eDNA, and telemetered Judas nutria.

Eradication campaigns are inherently long-term and require adequate and reliable funding to ensure a successful outcome. A full-scale campaign in California is estimated to cost more than \$5 million per year for at least of 7 years before significant progress is made. The Department estimates a total eradication campaign will take at least 20 years to complete, based on successful efforts in other parts of the country and the network of suitable habitat in California. The Department currently feels it has adequate operational funding through fall 2022 but will then experience a significant budget deficit if no other funds are identified.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in committee today. We look forward to working with you on solutions to this very real problem.