

Invasive Species Council hands out annual report card for 2006

Oregon given A-minus grade in battling invasive species

January 10, 2007... Oregon's Invasive Species Council has given the state a grade of A-minus for its overall successful efforts in 2006 against unwanted exotic organisms that could do great harm to Oregon. The grade matches the A-minus of 2005 and remains the highest mark issued since the council was established nearly five years ago. Previous grades on the annual report card included a "B" in 2004 and a "B-minus" in 2003.

"We are pleased with the results of the past year," says Dan Hilburn, current chair of the Invasive Species Council, and administrator of the Oregon Department of Agriculture's Plant Division. "On the list of the 100 worst species threatening Oregon, none of them became established in the state in 2006. Our primary goal is to keep those species out."

The Invasive Species Council coordinates public and private sector activities on unwanted, non-native species, and has issued its list of the 100 most dangerous invaders for the past four years. The list is especially helpful to agencies, landowners, environmental groups, industry and the general public. It could easily contain thousands of potentially invasive species, but is confined to a grouping worthy of focus from all Oregonians. The council wants to create an awareness of high priority organisms to exclude from Oregon. The list includes mammals, birds, insects, weeds, microorganisms, and more.

"We are trying to prevent introduction of organisms that would be bad for Oregon's ecology and economy," says Hilburn. "People are aware of water pollution. They are aware of air pollution. This is biological pollution. Not many people are aware that you can have living organisms move into an area, take over, and change the ecology of that area."

Examples of invasive species include zebra mussels— which could be devastating to aquatic life in Oregon's streams and rivers, gypsy moth— which could strip the leaves off many native trees in Oregon, and sudden oak death— which could kill certain trees in Oregon's forests and severely damage the state's important nursery industry.

In reviewing 2006, the council has noted that all of the 100 most dangerous species threatening to invade the state were successfully excluded or contained. Only one listed species— feral swine— is in danger of becoming permanently established, a situation that has carried over from the previous year.

"For 10 of the 100 listed species, we had eradication programs taking place last year, so we are very active in keeping these invaders out," says Hilburn.

Eradication efforts will continue this year. One of the most significant projects will be in St. Helens along the Columbia River, where an Asian gypsy moth was trapped last summer.

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"That's one of the worst pests we could have establish in Oregon," says Hilburn. "The female Asian gypsy moth has the ability to fly up to 20 miles every generation, which could lead to a rapid spread of an infestation. If we don't eradicate the pest now, we might not get another chance."

Another invasive species sure to get continued attention in 2007 is ramorum blight– also known as sudden oak death. Positive samples were collected last year at 13 Oregon nurseries. The report card issued by the council notes "this is a small percentage of the total inspected (approximately 2,000), but it continues a trend of finds in nurseries each year since 2003. In addition, 40 newly infected acres were detected in the wild in Curry County. This suggests our exclusion, detection, and eradication programs are not as effective as they need to be."

How does Oregon go from A-minus to A-plus in its battle against invasive species? In addition to being more effective against ramorum blight, the council would like to see greater progress in public outreach and education. Oregonians have started to realize that invasive non-native plants can become nasty weeds, and that non-native insects can become pests of agricultural crops and forests. But more can be done. Governor Kulongoski's recommended budget contains money to hire a coordinator for the Invasive Species Council, who would pursue grants and search for other fund sources for outreach and education.

Meanwhile, a special telephone hotline (1-866-INVADER) continues to be accessed by people reporting sightings of potentially important invasive species. Many of the calls are about species of which the council is already aware, but now and then, there are calls about something new.

"The average number of calls is somewhere between 30 and 60 each month," says Hilburn. "So in my mind, the hotline has really become the one-stop shopping center for invasive species we hoped it would be."

The Oregon Department of Agriculture finds itself in the middle of most efforts to exclude or eradicate invasive species. Out of the 100 listed worst invaders, as many as two-thirds have been dealt with directly by ODA, including eradication efforts last year against ramorum blight, giant hogweed, meadow hawkweed, kudzu, Patterson's curse, purple starthistle, distaff thistle, granulate ambrosia beetle, gypsy moth, and Japanese beetle.

Coordination and cooperation continue to be important ingredients for a successful fight against invasive species. As chair of the Invasive Species Council in Oregon this year, Hilburn is planning to work with the federal invasive species council and other state councils to address mutual problems and issues.

Still, it will take the public's help to be totally successful in the war against invasive species.

"These species would be bad for Oregon," says Hilburn. "That's why we are trying to keep them out and why we are trying to educate people to report unusual sightings. We want to follow up on these species before they get away from us and become established."

The full 2006 Invasive Species Council report card is available online at <oregon.gov/OISC>.

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