



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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**REPORT TO CONGRESS CALLS FOR MORE RESEARCH AND REVIEW
BEFORE INTRODUCING NEW EXOTIC SPECIES INTO AQUATIC ECOSYSTEMS**

Exotic aquatic species can be a boon or a bane, and sometimes both, for our national waterways, the economy, hobbyists, sportfishing, and a variety of other interests. The problem is that we often don't know the consequences on intentionally introducing these species until it's too late--and we need to know.

Those are the findings of an interagency task force in a report to Congress on the intentional introduction of fish and other aquatic organisms, such as nonindigenous grass carp, the aquatic plant hydrilla, and Japanese oysters, into ecosystems beyond their natural historic range. The report, "Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations of the Intentional Introductions Policy Review," was mandated by the Nonindigenous Aquatic Nuisance Prevention and Control Act of 1990. The task force is co-chaired by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

"Addressing the issue of nonindigenous aquatic species is long overdue," said Gary Edwards, the Service's Assistant Director-Fisheries. "On one hand, introducing species such as Pacific salmon into the Great Lakes has provided substantial public benefits while generating a multimillion dollar sportfishery. On the other hand, the introduction of other nonindigenous species, whether intentional or unintentional, has been the source of serious economic and environmental impacts. The goal is to minimize risks."

Aquatic nuisance species include hydrilla, zebra mussels, and a fish called "ruffe" that are quickly spreading through U.S. lakes, rivers, estuaries, wetlands, and coastal regions; impacting waterways and infrastructures; and competing with native aquatic organisms.

The report recommends more emphasis on research and education and extension programs to better understand and disseminate information on the risks associated with introducing nonindigenous species. The recommendations generally apply only to new introductions, thus taking into account ongoing activities of economic and social importance dependent upon previously introduced species. To minimize risks, the report recommends establishment of a Federal permitting system for imports from outside the United States to provide a credible review of proposed new introductions.

"New" introductions include movements of species into ecosystems where they do not currently occur. Ongoing introductions into ecosystems where the species is nonindigenous but is already established would not be considered "new" and thus would be largely unaffected by the recommendations.

"If not properly screened, introduced species may cause declines in native species, alter habitat important to humans and other species, and introduce pathogens and parasites," said Kate Kimball, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Deputy Assistant Secretary of Oceans and Atmosphere. "Once a species becomes established, control may be difficult, if not impossible."

Threats to native species may come from the intentional introduction of nonindigenous shellfish, fishes associated with sportfishing, accidental escapes of fish from both public and private culture facilities, and releases of fish by hobbyists. Hundreds of species are imported annually by the aquarium industry for resale or domestic production and these activities pose little or no risk to native species when properly controlled.

An introduced species altering the San Francisco Bay ecosystem is the Asian clam. Reaching densities of 30,000 clams per square meter, this species is displacing native mollusks and reducing levels of phytoplankton blooms.

For many cultured species, containment is becoming increasingly important. For example, because the African tilapia is an aggressive fish and competes with native species for spawning space and sites, many states prohibit its importation as they do other nonindigenous species.

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The report further identifies the need to expand educational programs as a key to the success of risk reduction. It calls for close cooperation and sharing of information among Federal agencies, the states, Tribal governments, industry, and private organizations to increase education and extension programs, to improve enforcement of existing laws, and to support research aimed at better understanding the risks involved with intentional introductions.

Copies of the report will be available the third week of September from the ANS Task Force Coordinator, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1849 C Street, NW. (820 ARLSQ), Washington, DC 20240, or phone 703-358-1718.