

**Statement for the Record  
U.S. Department of the Interior**

**House Committee on Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands**

**Legislative Hearing**

**H.R. 1572, Botanical Sciences and Native Plant Materials Research, Restoration, and  
Promotion Act**

**July 18, 2019**

Thank you for the opportunity to share the Department of the Interior's views on H.R. 1572, the Botanical Sciences and Native Plant Materials Research, Restoration, and Promotion Act. The Department manages over 480 million acres of public lands. Taken altogether and alongside the approximately 193 million acres managed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s Forest Service, these public lands encompass an extensive variety of plant communities that are native to North America. Invasive plant species are a challenge to the management of healthy working landscapes, and as such the Department is on the front line of the battle to restore native plant communities.

**Background**

Many of the Department's bureaus contribute to our work to resist invasive species and support native plant communities. Five bureaus participate in the Plant Conservation Alliance (PCA) Federal Committee, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), National Park Service (NPS), U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which serves as the current committee chair. The PCA is a public-private partnership of organizations that share the goal of protecting native plants by ensuring that native plant populations and their communities are maintained, enhanced, and restored. The PCA Federal Committee developed the *National Seed Strategy for Rehabilitation and Restoration* in order to address widespread shortages of native seed and foster increased federal, state, and tribal coordination across the nation to ensure the availability of genetically appropriate plants for stabilization, rehabilitation, and restoration treatments on lands impacted by natural disaster, invasive species and habitat loss.

In addition, the BLM has a Plant Conservation Program that uses public land resources to support the development of a supply of native seed and plant materials. Seeds are collected in the field, evaluated for cultivation, produced by private growers, and then stored for use in restoration work. It is a feedback cycle that, like with agronomic crops, can take decades to establish. Other bureaus often depend on this supply of native seeds to fulfill their own land management missions. The BLM leads a national seed bank called Seeds of Success. Using common protocols and many partnerships, Seeds of Success has over 24,000 collections, representing thousands of taxa from across the Nation.

FWS has developed a *Strategy for Plant Conservation*, to support and improve the conservation of imperiled plant species and their habitats. BLM and FWS are also implementing the *National Seed Strategy* through cross-programmatic efforts led by the BLM's Plant Conservation program, and FWS's National Wildlife Refuge System and Ecological Services Program. These efforts support the goal of ensuring that FWS has the native plant species needed to restore, enhance, and maintain fish and wildlife habitat on national wildlife refuges, as well as on private lands through the voluntary conservation actions of farmers, ranchers and forest landowners participating in the FWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife and Coastal Programs,

The National Park Service is responsible for protecting natural and cultural resources for future generations, and this entails both conserving native plant communities as well as using them to restore landscapes. The NPS manages areas with diverse habitats across the entire country, and invasive species are a threat to natural and historic landscapes that millions of Americans visit annually. Readily accessible and appropriate seed sources are an important component in the suite of tools staff use to manage invasives. The NPS seeks to build on the wide range of local seed partnerships parks have with Federal and private partners.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs supports Tribes' own plant conservation programs. Some native plants have particular cultural significance, and BIA project funding allows individual tribes to focus on tribal priority species lists to promote native species and an important part of the cultural fabric of the Tribe. An example is the Navajo Nation "Seeds of Change" project, funded by BIA in FY 2018 and 2019 in which the Tribe identifies and collects source population plant seeds according to protocols developed by the Bureau of Land Management's, Seeds of Success Program. The tribal herbarium will provide native plants for restoration of habitats impacted by non-native plants, while also conserving source seed populations for future generations.

The U.S. Geological Survey's Ecosystems Mission Area provides research to support botanical science, native plant conservation and management and informs decisions by DOI, state, and tribal land managers on issues related to improving ecosystem health. The USGS has the capacity to provide scientific expertise to develop innovative methods and assessment strategies for land management and invasive species management, early detection, and rapid response; lead collaborative efforts to develop guidance on seed transfer zones to deploy native plant materials in the right place; and reduce risk of natural hazards and promote land recovery after disasters. For example, USGS science helps DOI land management agencies manage habitat and mitigate threats of invasive cheatgrass in the Great Basin Desert and supports BLM with reclamation efforts and understanding of the costs vs. the benefits of common land treatment practices.

The Department's agencies support several plant material research and development programs, such as the Great Basin Native Plant Project and the Colorado Plateau Native Plant Program. These programs provide the research needed to establish seed production operations, usually by private growers. Native plant taxa can be grown for commercial sales – whether you are a home gardener or a landscape architect, you are encouraged to use plants that are native to your region – but they are also grown to produce seed supplies for agencies that manage ecosystems and public lands. The BLM alone can store up to 3 million pounds of plant materials – *i.e.* seeds, spores, or transplants – pre-positioned across the country. These supplies are ready

to be deployed by land management specialists when restoring a landscape after a wildland fire or to protect a habitat from non-native invasion.

### **H.R. 1572, Botanical Sciences and native Plant Materials Research, Restoration, and Promotion Act**

Title I directs the Department of the Interior to support botanical research and authorizes \$10 million for these efforts. It also requires that the Secretary hire not more than 20 additional full-time Botanical Science Personnel, and to establish a loan repayment program for such employees who received degrees in botany, plant ecology, and plant biology. The bill authorizes \$3 million for additional Botanical Science Personnel and \$1 million for loan repayment in FY 2020. While the Department recognizes the value of botanical science professionals, we believe the language in this title is overly restrictive of Department personnel and hiring policies.

Title II codifies that it is the policy of the United States that preference shall be made to the extent practicable for the use of locally adapted native plant materials. The title includes language for exceptions to this policy, such as in emergencies or when native plant materials are unavailable. Preventing the spread of noxious weeds to maintain healthy rangelands and reduce wildfire risk is a priority of the Department, which is why we support the use of locally adapted native plant materials. The Department is also implementing a National Seed Strategy to facilitate the development and use of native plant materials, and to support interagency collaboration. The Department does not require additional statutory authority to implement the National Seed Strategy and notes that this title of the bill is not necessary.

Title III authorizes particular programmatic activities at various Interior and USDA bureaus. Section 301 authorizes these agencies to collaborate on efforts to identify the need for native plant materials, pursue research to develop them, improve land management decision-making regarding the use of native plant materials, support pollinator species, and pursue restoration activities using locally adapted native plant materials. While the Department believes this additional authority is unnecessary, we do support collaboration among Interior and USDA agencies and we look forward to improving that collaboration.

Section 302 specifically authorizes a plant conservation program at the BLM. Under the bill the program would investigate rare plants on public lands and human impacts on such plant communities, support the bureau's need for native plant materials, develop plant material management and handling guidelines, support the establishment of a network of seed storage warehouses, and contribute to the interagency collaboration authorized in section 301. The bill authorizes \$35 million for this program. The Department notes that section 302 would authorize activities already undertaken by the BLM under current statutory authorities.

Finally, section 303 would direct the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) to ensure robust plant conservation programs and issue a report to Congress. The Department defers to NFWF on this provision.

### **Conclusion**

The Interior bureaus support a robust network of native plant material development and supply. Thank you for the opportunity to provide this statement.