

VII. Public Outreach and Information Access

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I. INTRODUCTION

All of the other working groups stated that an aggressive public outreach component was essential to the success of the Early Warning/ Rapid Response system. Public outreach can develop a public that is knowledgeable and willing to participate in detecting and reporting new sightings of invasive species. It also provides a public willing to support direction of the needed resources to deal with new problem species early and rapidly.

The specific charge to the Public Outreach and Information Access Working Group was to conceptualize an interagency system to bring the above concepts about, a public willing to assist in detecting and reporting potential new invasive species or expanding ranges of established invaders, through training appropriate personnel in observing, collecting, reporting, assessing and control or eradication. A number of special issues were suggest for consideration by the group, including:

- ❖ The potential uses of the internet in coordinating and communicating a National Early Warning System to the public;
- ❖ The development of an online invasive plant specialist directory;
- ❖ An automated mailing and archival software to radiate warning messages to network participants;
- ❖ The potential role of FICMNEW;
- ❖ Potential strategies for educating the public at large on the need to report suspicious new infestations;
- ❖ The development of an Internet Gateway/Site to receive new reports; and
- ❖ Disseminate alerts to high risk areas, and issue periodic online summaries of recent reports of new invasions.

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II. GROUP DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The discussion was restricted to education and outreach of the public, rather than a program to reach the professionals that would be dealing with the scientific and regulatory actions of Early Detection and Rapid Assessment and Response. There is a great need to draw the public into the concept of Early Detection and Rapid Response so they feel they can be a dynamic and contributing part of the effort, part of the solution, not part of the problem. R.E.A. was designated as characterizing a early detection system, meaning Rapid, Efficient and Accurate.

The Public Outreach Group was operating under three assumptions:

1. **Public involvement in Early Detection activities can make a difference** in how soon a new invasive species is detected. This is reasonable given that many species may escape to public areas and private backyards.
2. **The public will care about the impact of a new invasive species** given the appropriate information. Only if the resulting negative impact is of concern to the community will they continue to be on the lookout for new “hot spots”.
3. **The public will take action** both as individuals and as a community, once the information is provided. An individual or community will organize so as to act in the appropriate capacity for early detection, rapid reporting, eradication or control once the methods and technologies are provided.

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III. GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Establish a strategy for the empowerment of and involvement with key partners.

Such a strategy should identify target audiences and utilize the appropriate partner to reach that specific group. Other concepts to be identified are: on what level should the initial alert be broadcast, local, state or regional; what communication media would best supply information quickly to the appropriate source; how information will be transferred into the professional network for verification and archiving; and identify the effective outcome measures and how they will be evaluated.

2. Establish a national task group to create network for collaboration with similar state task groups that will work with county task groups. This hierarchical network would involve all stakeholders interested in participating as a partner. This stratifying of an educational/ public outreach program would allow outreach at whatever level is appropriate for the current invasive species outbreak. For example, Asian Longhorn Beetle would be considered a regional problem and outreach should be at that level. Whereas glassy wing sharpshooter was a southern California situation initially. The national task group should include all levels of government, tribal, NGO's, international groups, academia, industry and trade groups, and environmental groups.

3. Develop Educational Resources and have a Web-based Central Information Clearinghouse. New educational materials should be developed, both on the general topic of invasive species early detection, as well as timely materials dealing with the latest alert.

One way of increasing availability of existing materials is through a Virtual Central Catalog. Any group producing educational materials could provide information on cost, production runs, distribution/shipping information to the catalog, and interested groups could order them directly from the supplier. The catalog could cover any type of media, from compact disks, tape cassettes, videos to printed materials including handbooks, flyers, etc. Training materials such as key, fact sheets, survey forms, etc could be posted.

A short turnaround time for releasing information on new introductions could be achieved by developing web-based templates that would have standardized format and content. These would be easily adapted to insert the information needed for the invasive species and locale in question and would be accessible for any group to use. Templates could be developed for wanted posters, flyers, fact sheets, brochures, etc.

Other ideas not specifically linked to early detection were explored. Many other educational materials could be developed and made available through a Virtual Catalog, for instances quizzes and games and teaching modules for K-12. A web-based course on invasive species for teachers could used for required continuing education credits. Also canned talks on specific species or invasive species topics could be downloaded, and a National /State Speakers Bureau could be established.

4. Establish a communication network for rapid exchange and distribution of early detection information.

Early detection is only valuable if the information is distributed rapid and efficiently, while there is still time to take action. Plans for distribution should already be in place at all levels, nationally, regionally and locally.

On a National basis, it would be easiest to work through multiplying entities, those groups that can forward on information to multiple other groups. Certainly web-based distribution will be critical in this manner, with alerts being posted on national level websites and mailing lists. Other multipliers might be national companies, horticultural retailers like Wal-Mart, Home Depot, and Catalog nurseries.

On a Regional basis, State and Regional Land Management Centers (Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service Plant Materials Centers to name just a few.) could carry a message for visitors to their land. Many of these same visitors would carry the message back to other states. Universities and professional societies could issue alerts through their regional components.

A local distribution network might be composed of posting flyers in grocery stores, Library branches, and Garden centers. Many groups have already been successful in working with local newspapers to develop inserts. A group in California was able to get a line on the local ,

5. Target the media as a 24/7 communication network.

Media relations can be critical in communicating directly to the public, and with establishing the credibility of the information. At the national scale, the electronic news bureaus such as Associated Press can be invaluable in disseminating information across the country. To set up a knowledgeable media, seminars for journalists could be held to provide background information on the issue as well as explanations of the immediacy of a new sighting.

The local Cable TV distributor often has a channel reserved for local information, both in new shows and talk show formats. Community service information distributors, such as libraries and museums should be contacted. Other regional/local media such as the environmental newspapers, freelance writers, local newspapers, etc. should also be included in any developing news on local, regional and national impacts of invasive species. The committees or coordinators dealing with invasive species should become adept at pulling together the needed press packages with relevant information as well as when and how to release appropriate press releases. Video clips of stock footage should be made available to new organizations as attachments to any press releases.

In addition to a characterization of Invasive Species alerts as appropriate news flashes. There is also the option of taking out paid advertising on any scale. In planning a national media blitz for the general topic, it would probably be prudent to work with professional marketing agency. Many local groups have been successful at engaging the

public by paying for local inserts on their current weed problems. Public Service Announcements (PSA) should be developed and made available for local news/media outlets, and these PSAs should be kept current.

Documentaries of the invasive species impacts can be very effective in laying out the problem before the public. Film from these documentaries can be used in shorter educational videos, or even made available as stock footage to the media or used for PSAs.

6. Develop efficient ways to make information accessible and useful in all directions from messengers to recipients and back.

A “World-Wide Weed Web” (WWW) would be a development that would be extremely useful, and far reaching in addressing early alerts. The initiation of such a project would be both daunting and challenging, yet perhaps one of the most doable suggestion in the section. For the development of websites can be done by anyone who is willing to sit down and learn the fundamentals. The challenge would be in screening the participant websites for accuracy and credibility of information posted. For this reason, the backbone of such a undertaking would have to be the government agencies, NGO’s , industry, academic and scientific institutions. For example: state, local government, extension agents, farm bureaus, libraries, schools of all level could develop websites relevant to their own issues,, but there would still have to be an organizing force at the national and international level.

A WWW would be useful in posting not only early alerts, but also training materials, templates for information brochures and other educational materials. When a new alert is issued, a taxonomic key could be posted to help volunteers identify the new invasive from other related or look-a-like organisms.

7. Develop mechanisms for the public to become involved.

Volunteer Programs for Early Detection on Invasives can be quite powerful. Now only would they serve to get hundreds of thousands of new eyes looking for new invasions, but they would also serve to reinforce the information received through other outlets. There are three crucial concepts for a successful volunteer program for early detection. 1) The partnerships are developed early, before there is a new invasion; 2) the volunteers are duly recognized in a public manner for their contributions; 3) there is adequate feedback to the volunteers that their efforts have been successful and useful.

There are a number of options for developing such a national program, but one of the best models would be the “Master” program, such as Master Gardeners and Master Loggers, often taught through universities and their extension programs. Volunteers trained in these programs could become the local spotters on a county basis. They could also serve as the local base in working with youth groups, such as Girl and Boy Scouts, 4-H and Future Farmers of America (FFA). They could work with schools to sponsor science fair projects dealing with invasive species. These volunteers would be the local link to a feedback system into the Statewide coordinator’s office. There are also professional groups that could be drawn in to provide additional information in the course of their

normal duties, such as the Crop Consultants of America, or Highway Dept personnel.

Two specific volunteer projects that were mentioned were Highway cleanup teams and a National Invasive Species Inventory. The Highway Cleanup Teams would work similar to the Adopt a Highway program, where a local volunteer group periodically walks a highway corridor to inventory and identify any invasive species. The group could go a step farther with eradication or control where safe methods were available. The National Invasive Species Inventory would work similar to the Audubon Christmas Bird Count. This would perhaps best work on sensitive areas that are vulnerable to invasive species, or on perimeter areas of infestations. A well trained volunteer force could augment the professional cadre by a hundredfold in carrying out such crucial inventories.

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IV. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ *Establish a strategy for the empowerment of and involvement with key partners;*
- ❖ *Establish a national task group to create network for collaboration with similar state task groups that will work with county task groups;*
- ❖ *Develop Educational Resources and have a Web-based Central Information Clearinghouse;*
- ❖ *Establish a communication network for exchange and distribution of appropriate information;*
- ❖ *The media is targeted as a 24/7 communication network;*
- ❖ *Develop efficient ways to make information accessible and useful in all directions from messengers to recipients and back; and*
- ❖ *Develop mechanisms for the public to become involved.*

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