



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE FORESTERS

444 North Capitol Street NW | Suite 387 | Washington, DC 20001 | www.stateforesters.org

August 10, 2021

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
US Department of Agriculture
Jamie L. Whitten Building 200-A
1400 Jefferson Dr SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

The National Association of State Foresters (NASF) recently became aware of efforts to garner support for the construction and operation of a USDA Agricultural Research Service (ARS) invasive pest biocontrol research and development facility in the State of Hawaii. NASF supports the construction of this ARS facility as it would provide needed resources for invasive species control efforts in the Asia-Pacific region while bolstering national biological control capacity for the protection of native ecosystems, including those that are forested.

NASF represents the directors of the state forestry agencies in all 50 states, eight U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia. State foresters deliver technical and financial assistance to the millions of private landowners who protect forest health, wildlife habitat, and water resources through their management of more than two-thirds of forests in the U.S. State forestry agencies are also responsible for wildfire protection on more than 1.5 billion acres nationwide and routinely partner with federal agencies through congressional authorities to manage our national forests and grasslands.

One of the greatest threats identified in the states' Forest Action Plans are native and non-native pests and diseases, which have the potential to displace native tree species and other vegetation types found in forests. Scientific research is a critical component of forest pest and disease mitigation efforts—efforts which would be bolstered by a new Pacific regional ARS biocontrol facility in Hawaii.

The Asia-Pacific region's systems for conveying goods have transported numerous invasive species (including insects, wildlife, and plants) that have negatively affected local agricultural production, forest health and resilience, cultural resources, and so many other aspects of human life. The current biocontrol facilities on the Oahu and Hawaii Islands are not meeting the agricultural, forestry, and wildlife protection needs of their communities. The following are examples of non-native pests and disease threatening the natural environment and economy of Hawaii and the Asia-Pacific region:

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A new fungal pathogen known as Rapid Ohia Death (ROD) was identified on Hawaii Island in 2014. The fungus attacks and can quickly kill ohia trees. Ohia is endemic to Hawaii and comprises approximately 80% of Hawaii's native forests, covering more than one million acres statewide and serving as the backbone for Hawaii's forest watersheds. ROD has already killed hundreds of thousands of Hawaii's iconic and native ohia trees. More must be done to help minimize further spread and give researchers time to find answers and develop potential treatments.

The Coconut Rhinoceros Beetle was first detected in Hawaii in December 2013. This invasive pest is native to Southeast Asia. It attacks coconut palms by boring into the crowns or tops of the tree where it damages growing tissue and feeds on tree sap. The damage can significantly reduce coconut production and kill the tree. The beetle is also known to feed on economically important commercial crops such as bananas, sugarcane, papayas, sisal, pineapples, and date palms.

The Brown Tree Snake, native to Indonesia, the Solomon Islands, New Guinea and Australia was first detected in Guam in the 1950's. The snakes feed on lizards, birds, small mammals, and eggs. Since the tree snake has no natural predators or other controls on Guam, it multiplied rapidly and has virtually wiped out Guam's native forest birds. The snakes also crawl on electrical lines and cause expensive power outages and electrical damage.

A new ARS biocontrol facility in Hawaii would provide essential scientific expertise on pest and disease mitigation efforts in the Asia-Pacific region that would help address agricultural production and forestry concerns, as well as restore native ecosystems and protect the threatened and endangered native species most vulnerable to invasive species. Reducing the number of invasive species entering the region's transportation networks will reduce the risk of these species becoming established in additional locations in the future.

We are pleased to join other organizations in support of building a new ARS biocontrol facility in Hawaii which is long overdue, and we respectfully ask for your support in making this important initiative a reality.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Joe A. Fox". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Joe Fox
NASF President
Arkansas State Forester