

National Assembly for Wales
Environment and Sustainability Committee

Inquiry into Invasive Non Native Species

January 2014



Cynulliad
Cenedlaethol
Cymru

National
Assembly for
Wales

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Environment and Sustainability Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
CF99 1NA

Tel: 029 2089 8639

Fax: 029 2089 8021

Email: ES.Comm@wales.gov.uk

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Introduction

1. The Committee has undertaken a short inquiry into how the problem of Invasive Non Native Species (INNS) is being addressed in Wales. We agreed the following terms of reference for the inquiry:

- To assess the adequacy of data and information currently available on the extent and impacts of invasive alien species in Wales;
- To assess the action taken to date by the Welsh Government and relevant authorities to tackle this issue; and
- To consider the European Commission's proposals to bring forward a Directive that would require Member States to take coordinated action to address this issue.

2. On 9 May 2013, we invited a range of organisations to join us at the National Botanic Gardens to share their perspectives. We heard from:

- Welsh Local Government Association;
- Caerphilly County Borough Council;
- Swansea Council;
- Snowdonia National Park Authority;
- Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority;
- Wildlife Trusts Wales;
- National Farmers' Union Cymru;
- Farmers' Union of Wales;
- Natural Resources Wales; and
- GB Non-Native Species Secretariat.

3. INNS pose significant environmental and economic risks to Wales; on land and at sea. The GB non-native species secretariat estimates that they cost the UK approximately £1.7 billion every year. In terms of environmental damage, they challenge the survival of native species such as the Red Squirrel and the Water Vole. INNS such as the Australian Swamp-stonecrop can smother ponds and lakes, disturbing sensitive ecosystems and can contribute to biodiversity loss. Some INNS, such as the Giant Hogweed, pose a direct threat to human health. Others have more hidden consequences,

such as increasing flood risk through the erosion of riverbanks and the clogging of watercourses.

4. We are also aware of the on-going GB Strategy Review. It will be important for Wales to have a strong voice in this process.

Evidence from stakeholders

5. It was clear from what we heard at this meeting that there are good examples of dealing with INNS across Wales. Examples provided to us included Swansea Council's approach to monitoring; the Heads of the Valleys partnership's progress in tackling Japanese Knotweed; and Natural Resources Wales (NRW) gave us the example of the river Alyn near Mold, where Denbighshire and Flintshire Councils, in conjunction with anglers and community groups, have been clearing the river of Himalayan Balsam.

6. The examples of good practice we heard, whilst encouraging, are localised and it was not clear to us that they are being considered in a national context.

7. We heard that data collection varies in quality and geographic extent. We heard that new technology presents opportunities to capture data in different ways and that this is already happening through projects such as the Plantlife application for smartphones.

8. Most of the stakeholders we spoke to believed that powers of entry onto private land could assist in tackling INNS. However, this view was not shared by the farming unions.

9. Raising awareness of the prevalence of INNS and how easily they can be spread is vital. Many people do not realise how widespread the problem is and that species they see on a daily basis could pose such a threat. More should be done in areas of open access to draw invasive species to the public's attention and the steps they should take to avoid spreading seeds on their clothing or shoes. We heard how the wildlife trusts provide information through their guided walks and training courses, the expertise of these volunteers and others such as fishermen could be used to raise awareness further.

10. Other points raised included:

- A river-catchment based approach to tackling INNS is required;
- Greater funding and resourcing is required;
- Low stocking rates, encouraged by some agri-environment schemes, may have led to undergrazing which may have unintentionally aided the spread of some INNS;

- Glastir includes targeting of Rhodedendron, and some stakeholders suggested that it could be expanded to other species; and
- Farming unions stated that INNS duties are included in cross-compliance and that Glastir would need to have greater uptake to be effective in controlling INNS.

Evidence from the Welsh Government

11. On 13 June 2013, we heard from Welsh Government officials. They informed us of the latest policy position from the Welsh Government's perspective. Two clear messages came through from this evidence session:

- It is important to maintain a broad perspective on the challenge posed by INNS. There is a risk of focusing on the better known and established species, as the cost of missing opportunities to tackle lesser-known or emerging threats; and
- The Welsh Government only has one dedicated officer who focuses on INNS policy for the whole of Wales, and there is no dedicated budget for tackling INNS.

12. Gaining access to land to allow authorities to take action to dispose of species can pose a large barrier to dealing with the problem, should the land owner be unwilling to co-operate or not be contactable. We raised this issue with Welsh Government officials, specifically whether NRW could be granted powers to access land to deal with invasive species, and would welcome clarification on this issue.

13. The European Commission's proposals were not published until after we had concluded our evidence gathering. However, some views were expressed in relation to the potential for European legislation in this area. We would welcome your response to the proposed new European legislation, and details of any discussions you or your officials have held with the UK Government on this issue.

14. All papers relating to the meetings on 9 May and 13 June; verbatim transcripts; and audio recordings are available at:

<http://www.senedd.assemblywales.org/ieIssueDetails.aspx?Id=6591&Opt=3>

Conclusion

15. In conclusion, we believe that action to address INNS has been effective in parts of Wales, but the picture across the country is patchy. Coordination of effort is needed to properly assess the extent of the risk posed by INNS and to take action to address this risk. This is especially important given the limited resources available to the agencies tasked with tackling INNS. Coordination of effort can lead to a focusing of limited resources and has the potential to make the response to INNS in Wales more effective.

16. We believe that NRW is the best-placed organisation to lead on the co-ordination of data collection and action to address invasive non-native species. By making NRW the lead organisation, we do not expect it to shoulder the burden of addressing INNS alone. The designation of a lead organisation should not detract from the collaborative approach that will be necessary. We believe that having an organisation to lead efforts will enhance the impact that the collaborative approach can have.

17. It is important that we can see the progress that is being made in Wales and we would like to see a regular report from the Welsh Government or NRW that can act as a basis for this monitoring.

The Committee's Recommendations

Recommendation 1. We recommend that the Welsh Government designates Natural Resources Wales as the lead organisation for the co-ordination of data collection and action to address Invasive Non Native Species in Wales, maintaining a link with the GB Non-Native Species Secretariat. This should be done as soon as possible, and no later than the end of March 2014.

Recommendation 2. We recommend that the Welsh Government sets out how it will monitor Natural Resources Wales' performance in tackling Invasive Non Native Species in Wales. This should be done at the same time as the designation of Natural Resources Wales as the lead organisation.

Recommendation 3. We recommend that the Welsh Government sets out how Wales is being represented as part of the GB Strategy Review, and how Welsh stakeholders are being engaged, by the end of February 2014.

Recommendation 4. We recommend that the Welsh Government reports to the Assembly on the implications for Wales once the GB Strategy Review is completed. We understand that this should be towards the end of 2014.

Recommendation 5. We recommend that the Welsh Government writes to the Environment and Sustainability Committee on an annual basis to set out progress in combating Invasive Non Native Species in Wales, starting in March 2014.

Recommendation 6. In the context of the current Environment Bill White Paper consultation, we recommend that the Welsh Government considers the merits of managing Invasive Non Native Species on a river catchment basis when defining the areas for an area-based natural resource management approach.

Recommendation 7. We recommend that the Welsh Government sets out how it is considering the issue of access to land for the purpose of tackling Invasive Non Native Species, particularly in the context of the forthcoming Environment Bill and the Minister for Culture and Sport's review of access legislation.

Recommendation 8. We recommend that the Welsh Government provides a response to the European Commission's proposals for Invasive Non Native

Species and their implications for Wales. In doing so, we ask that this response includes details of discussions the Welsh Government has had with the UK Government in relation to these proposals.