

October 20, 2004

The President

The Vice President

Speaker of the House

Washington, D.C. 20500

Re: Damage Caused by Invasive Aquatic and Riparian Species on the U.S.-Mexico Border

Dear President Bush:

The Good Neighbor Environmental Board (GNEB) urges the federal government to provide resources to address the serious economic and environmental damage caused by invasive aquatic and riparian plant species in the United States-Mexico border region. These invasive species are very difficult to contain or eradicate, and at great expense. They are endangering habitat and water resources on both sides of the international boundary as well as affecting businesses such as farming, tourism, and fishing. Given the unique dynamics of managing trans-boundary natural resources, the board respectfully requests that particular attention be given to this problem.

While of concern throughout the entire nation, aquatic and riparian invasive species are of special concern in areas that are characterized by extreme water scarcity such as the U.S.- Mexico border region. In some cases, they are directly consuming large volumes of already scarce water, while in others, their presence makes it more difficult to transport the water that does exist to specific user groups. The scale and magnitude of the economic costs have not been accurately estimated, but residents whose livelihoods depend on a stable and viable environment fear that containment soon will become unmanageable.

In the Lower Rio Grande, for example, water managers periodically must contend with invasion by water hyacinth (*Eichornia crassipes*) and by hydrilla (*Hydrilla verticillata*). These weeds use the water to multiply and choke the flow of the River. Despite some modest progress, considerable resources continue to be required to keep pace with and control the problem. A continuing binational management program should be put into place to ensure the long-term health of this section of the river.

Another species of concern along the Rio Grande and its tributaries is salt cedar (*Tamarix spp.*). Not only does salt cedar replace native plant communities, but the rate at which it uses water generally exceeds that of native plants. Additionally, as suggested by its name, salt cedar takes up salt from the soil and releases it into the environment, with potentially negative impacts on water quality.

In Del Rio, Texas, giant river cane (*Arundo donax*) has infested San Felipe Creek, a Rio Grande tributary. This species out-competes native plants, has a high rate of water use, and breaks away during floods, creating blockages at drains and bridges and making the flooding even worse.

Administrative support is provided by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Cooperative Environmental Management Mail Code 1601E
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The border region's other major transboundary waterway, the Colorado River, also has suffered from invasive species infestations. In addition to salt cedar, a floating fern called giant salvinia (*Salvinia molesta*)

has become an increasing problem on the lower portion of the river. First detected there in 1999, the invasive fern since has spread rapidly. Thick mats of the plant reduce oxygen content, degrading water quality for aquatic species. The mats also impede recreational activities such as boating and fishing, and clog water intakes for irrigation.

Examples such as those just cited underscore the need to implement an effective binational strategy fueled by federal support and resources that are available for use in both countries. Unlike many issues surrounding water resources in the border region, the issue of invasive aquatic and riparian species largely is noncontentious and noncontroversial: virtually all stakeholders and economic sectors in both countries agree that invasive species pose a growing problem that needs to be stemmed. In view of this consensus, addressing the problem may offer a rare opportunity for binational collaboration toward a common goal that includes all stakeholder groups.

The Good Neighbor Environmental Board appreciates the opportunity to bring this timely issue to the attention of the Administration. The Board is available to provide additional information if requested.

(Note on the Board: The GNEB is a federal advisory committee created to advise the President and Congress on environmental and infrastructure issues and needs within the states contiguous to Mexico. It was created by the Enterprise for the Americas Initiative Act of 1992 (EAIA 7 U.S. Code Section 5404).

Sincerely,

Placido dos Santos, Chair

cc:

Kathleen Clarke, Director
U.S. Bureau of Land Management

John W. Keys, III, Commissioner
U.S. Bureau of Reclamation

Michael Leavitt, Administrator
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Gale A. Norton, Secretary of the Interior
U.S. Department of the Interior

Secretariat,
North American Commission on Environmental Cooperation

Ann M. Veneman, Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture

Steven A. Williams, Director
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Services

Lori Williams, Staff Director
National Invasive Species Council