



House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries

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Testimony of Ms. Christy Martin, Program Manager, Hawai'i Coordinating Group on Alien Pest Species

Aloha Chair Hageman, Vice Chair Ezell, Ranking Member Hoyle, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today in **strong support of HR 4219**, the National Wildlife Refuge System Invasive Species Strike Team Act of 2025. My name is Christy Martin and I am the program manager of the Coordinating Group on Alien Pest Species (CGAPS) under the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. I have worked on invasive species issues for more than 25 years, serving with the Maui Invasive Species Committee and then shifting to a statewide and regional focus with CGAPS. Over the years I participated in multiple rapid response operations including coconut rhinoceros beetle, Rapid Ohia Death, a fungal disease caused by *Ceratocystis* species that has killed large numbers of native 'ōhi'a trees across Hawai'i, little fire ant, and even species invading our reefs such as pulse coral, an invasive soft coral popular in the aquarium trade. My work has included on-the-ground control actions, planning, securing funding, outreach, and education. From 2022-2025 I also had the privilege of serving as Vice Chair and then Chair of the Invasive Species Advisory Committee (ISAC) guiding the development of white papers and advice on requested invasive species topics for consideration by the National Invasive Species Council.

The invasive species problem in Hawai'i is very serious and the impacts go far beyond native species. It impacts our ability grow our own food, it prevents market access for our crops, and is decimating our high-value native hardwood forests, outdoor activities, and quality of life. In the early 1990s, two reports documented the significant problem of invasive species in Hawai'i, owing largely to gaps in prevention, rapid response, and pest management capacity and programs. The Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) produced one of these studies and stated that Hawai'i's "alien pest problem", as it was known then, as, "the worst in the nation." CGAPS was formed shortly thereafter as a partnership of agencies and non-governmental organizations whose goal is to identify and fix the gaps in Hawai'i's prevention, response, and control policies and programs, and to raise public awareness.

OTA's assessment was accurate. A risk assessment conducted in 2001 by the Hawai'i Department of Agriculture and Biosecurity of incoming flights into Kahului, Maui, a port that receives less than 2% of incoming goods, found an average of one new—not known to occur in Hawai'i—pest or pathogen arriving each day. In 2018 a report by the U.S. Geological Survey found that Hawai'i had 200% the density of non-native species compared to the 48 contiguous states, and nearly equal the number of non-native plants despite being less than 0.4% the size of

the continental U.S. We, like many other States and the Territories, need additional capacity to respond to new invasive species while there is still a chance of eradication, and where necessary, apply cost-effective mitigations to minimize the negative impacts of particularly harmful established pests.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has developed a capacity to respond to invasive species with the National Wildlife Refuge System Invasive Species Strike Teams. The Strike Team model was based on National Park Service Exotic Plant Management Teams and hotshot fire crews. The Strike Teams do not replace existing weed or pest management programs within Refuges, but instead provide added expertise and cost-effective capacity to address new incursions before they become established and even more costly, perpetual problems. The Strike Teams have a record of success across the country. Many times, the Strike Teams leverage partnerships for complex or multi-step projects, and since I am based in Hawai'i, I wanted to share some examples of the accomplishments of the Strike Teams in my region.

Perhaps my favorite example is the eradication of yellow crazy ants on Johnston Atoll, an unincorporated territory of the U.S. This atoll played an important role in the U.S. military's operations in the Pacific for more than seventy years while also serving as a national wildlife refuge for native birds since the 1920s. More than 14 species of seabirds are known to nest on the island, including the largest colony of red-tailed tropicbirds in the world, because of the lack of invasive pests on the atoll. However, yellow crazy ants were accidentally introduced to Johnston where they multiplied to huge populations and fed on seabirds by spraying them with formic acid which causes burns and blindness, allowing the ants to overwhelm and kill the birds. The Crazy Ant Strike Team was formed, with team members switching in and out and over the eleven years it took to develop and implement the eradication plan which required delivering ant bait and a toxicant within a few yards of all ant nests multiple times over the course of a few years to ensure that the worker ants found the bait and every queen ant had been served enough doses of the toxicant to kill the whole colony. The team had to deliver the pancake batter-like ant bait to hard-to-reach areas, then switched to baits and toxicants in a hydrogel to get the last remaining colonies. A team of volunteer detector dogs and handlers from Conservation Dogs of Hawai'i were then used to survey for any remaining ant colonies; no ants were detected in 2021, and eradication was declared successful. The atoll remains free of yellow crazy ants to this day, protecting seabirds and the critical role they play in promoting ocean productivity around Johnston Atoll National Wildlife Refuge and the Pacific Islands Heritage Marine National Monument.

A second example is the installation of the largest predator-proof fence in the U.S. at Kilauea Point National Wildlife Refuge in 2023, followed by the 2025 eradication of feral pigs and cats from within the 168 acre fenced area. This resulted in the highest numbers of successful nests of Laysan albatross, wedge-tailed shearwaters, and red-tailed tropic birds in decades. The installation of repurposed conveyor belts provide a longer-term physical barrier and weed-break necessary for maintaining the integrity of the fence. This was a collaborative project was led by the Hawai'i & Pacific Islands ISST with AmeriCorps interns, contactors, and partners. Establishing the Strike Force program legislatively will ensure these cost-effective successes continue.

Like Refuges in Hawai'i and across the U.S., the Guam National Wildlife Refuge struggles with feral pigs. However, the efficacy of different trapping methods can vary due to different behaviors in different environments. In 2025, Invasive Species Strike Team biologists partnered with U.S. Department of Agriculture APHIS Wildlife Services (Wildlife Services) to learn what trapping methods are most effective on the Refuge. Wildlife Services tested their methods of using metal corral and pig brig traps baited with coconuts within the Refuge throughout the entire year. The team placed most of the traps close to administrative buildings to help with the high amount of pig damage occurring in those areas resulting in the removal of 118 pigs from the Refuge. This information can be used to more efficiently and effectively manage pig populations in similar areas.

These three examples don't even begin to convey the number of projects that have been conducted by the Strike Team program, or the untold numbers of species and acres that have been protected. However, I wanted to also speak to the language in this bill in Section 2 (b)(3), Provision of Assistance which authorizes the Secretary to conduct outreach to address the management of a neighboring property, or one that is "ecologically related to" a Refuge System unit, including providing or entering into, upon request,

financial assistance;
technical assistance;
contracts; and
cooperative agreements

This is welcome language that would clearly allow the Strike Teams to provide more support outside of the Refuge boundaries, which makes good sense for early detection/rapid response species and priority invasive species threats. As we all know, invasive species do not respect property lines and addressing a harmful species outside a Refuge while it can still be eradicated or managed will protect Refuge resources and reduce costs in the long run.

Further, there are many examples of high-profile invasive species incursions that require an all-hands-on-deck approach. ISSTs support interjurisdictional planning and coordination, identifying shared priorities, and help with local, state, and DoD preparedness. The language in subparagraph (B) also provides that other Federal departments or agencies may enter into an agreement to respond, via expertise and the use of the response teams, to an invasive species under that department.

It is well-established that the movement of species into new areas is increasing, and that a percentage of these non-native species will become invasive and harmful in their new locations. Invasive species damage food security, economies, natural resources, public health, and cultures worldwide, costing the global economy over \$423 billion annually, and those costs have quadrupled every decade since 1970. There is an ongoing and increasing need to establish policies and programs to prevent and respond to invasive species threats. H.R. 4219 would continue this excellent gap-filling program, with a few changes to make it even more effective.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

Aloha,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Christy Martin', with a stylized flourish at the end.

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**Note: The views expressed are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views or position of the University of Hawai‘i.*