

PREVENTING HARMS FROM INVASIVE PLANTS

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WHY IT MATTERS

Every day, invasive plants overtake another 4,600 acres in the United States,¹ damaging and even tearing down our forest canopy trees and leaving a tangled mess that can prevent birds from nesting, pollinators from nectaring, and wildlife from accessing water and food. Invasive species can exacerbate the impacts of climate change, making communities more vulnerable. Kudzu and Japanese knotweed accelerate the greenhouse effect by releasing carbon stored in the soil into the atmosphere.²

Invasive species play a key role in 60% of global plant and animal extinctions and are one of the five most important drivers of biodiversity loss.³ The rapid growth of invaders like kudzu (one foot per day, or 60 to 100 feet per summer), Japanese knotweed, and autumn olive can turn diverse forests and riparian areas into ecological “dead zones” within a few growing seasons, affecting insects, birds, mammals, and reptiles that have evolved to rely on native plants for food.

The invasive plant crisis deeply affects us all. Farmers face punctured tires from invasive Callery pears, fountain grass ruins pastures, and oriental bitter-sweet poisons livestock.

Property owners and local governments face the constant, significant financial burden of managing invasive species on their land. Recreationally, when people see vines like porcelain-berry smothering trees and overtaking trails, they experience sadness, frustration, and even depression. Dedicated conservationists and land managers are overwhelmed and demoralized by the sheer scale of the problem, working tirelessly with dwindling resources to protect the natural heritage that sustains us.

The Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) has identified 103 species of invasive plants threatening the Commonwealth,⁴ with more under assessment.

Invasive plants pose a significant threat to climate resilience. By disrupting ecosystem structure and function, they weaken the capacity of natural systems to adapt to climate change, while also endangering local livelihoods and economies. Managing invasive plants helps restore healthy ecosystems and build communities that are more resilient to drought, floods, wildfires, and other climate-related challenges.⁵

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Virginia has made recent policy progress on invasive species and, in 2025, passed the consumer education

bill, requiring retail signage in proximity to each invasive plant effective January 2027.

Recently enacted policies in Virginia include: partial funding of the Virginia Invasive Species Management Plan (VISMP); prohibiting state agencies from planting, selling, or propagating invasive plants; requiring tradespersons involved with proposing or installing plants to provide written notification to property owners for all plants proposed for installation that are included on the list of invasive plants; and allowing localities to permit the supervised use of herbicides by volunteers on public lands. These are important policies but their scope only allows localities to make incremental progress, whereas measurable reductions to the harms caused by invasive plants to our state’s economy, environment, and human and animal health are needed statewide.

Our state also faces a unique challenge. Virginia’s Noxious Weeds Law⁶ requires that the “commercial viability” of plants be considered, limiting decision-makers’ ability to add new invasive plants to the Noxious Weeds List and conduct eradication and suppression activities — even if these plants harm the economy, environment, or human, animal, or plant health. Per the Virginia Invasive Species Working Group, the impact of all invasive flora and fauna on the Commonwealth’s economy is estimated to cost more than \$1 billion per year.⁷

The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) may no longer plant invasive plants along Virginia’s roadsides; however, requirements to control invasive plants within any state highway right-of-way are limited to only two invasive species.⁸

Funding cuts have interrupted wavyleaf grass control in the core area of infestation surrounding Shenandoah National Park, threatening the wildlife and natural beauty that visitors come to enjoy.

OPPORTUNITIES ALIGNING PRIORITIES

The Code of Virginia’s Noxious Weeds Law requires plants to be evaluated for their “commercial viability,”⁹ even if these plants cause harm to our economy, environment, or human, animal, or plant health. Removing this requirement would allow decision-makers to add new invasive plants to the noxious weeds list, protecting our farmers, wildlife, and communities, and helping build a more resilient Virginia.

EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES

Current law allows public service districts to be established to manage transportation, water, solid waste, and infrastructure. The law also allows for controlling

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dangerous insects and other pests per the Virginia Pest Law,¹⁰ as well as beautification and landscaping. Adding invasive plants to this list will assist communities in funding invasive plant removal and control.

MANAGING SPREAD

Roads act as significant pathways for the spread of invasive plants, providing a network of disturbed soils and habitats that are easily colonized, and they serve as corridors for seeds and reproducing plant fragments to move long distances. The Virginia Department of Transportation manages nearly 60,000 miles of public roads, making it the third-largest state-maintained highway system in the United

States. VDOT needs adequate resources to control invasive plants along our roadways.

CONTINUING EFFORTS

The rapid spread of invasive wavyleaf grass poses an accelerated threat in and around Shenandoah National Park (SNP), a crown jewel of Virginia's public access parks. Empirical data from within the core area of infestation have shown that treating wavyleaf grass for five consecutive years reduced large populations to remnant individual plants. Providing recurring funding for wavyleaf grass treatment in communities near SNP will help protect the park and the surrounding local economies.

TOP TAKEAWAYS

The requirement to consider the “commercial viability” of invasive plants restricts decision-makers' ability to add new invasive species to the state's Noxious Weeds List and limits Virginia's ability to efficiently protect natural resources and build more resilient communities.

Public service districts provide an existing common-sense policy solution for raising funds to control invasive plants.

Controlling invasive plants along roadways and sustaining wavyleaf grass treatment have been shown to reduce rapid spread.

ENDNOTES

1. *Pulling Together: A National Strategy for Management of Invasive Plants*. (1998). U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management. https://www.blm.gov/sites/blm.gov/files/Program_Weeds_Pulling%20Together.pdf.
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3. *Media Release: IPBES Invasive Alien Species Assessment*. (2023, September 4). Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. <https://www.ipbes.net/IASmediarelease#>
4. *Invasive Plants Species List*. (n.d.). Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural-heritage/invspdflist>.
5. *Invasive Species Threaten the Success of Climate Change Adaptation Efforts*. (2025). U.S. Department of the Interior. <https://www.doi.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2024-02/isac-climate-change-white-paper-november-2023.pdf>.
6. Powers and duties of Board; quarantine, § 3.2-802. (2025) <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacodefull/title3.2/chapter8/>.
7. About Invasive Species in Virginia. Virginia Invasive Species. <https://www.invasivespeciesva.org/about>.
8. Prohibition of certain weeds and plants on highway rights-of-way, § 33.2-217 (2025). <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/title33.2/chapter2/section33.2-217/>.
9. Powers and duties of Board; quarantine, § 3.2-802. (2025) <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacodefull/title3.2/chapter8/>.
10. Powers of service districts, § 15.2-2403 (2025). <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/title15.2/chapter24/section15.2-2403/>.