

programs is available on the Internet at <http://www.aphis.usda.gov>.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: For information on the Official Control Program, contact Ms. Diane L. Schuble, National Coordinator for Official Control Programs, Emergency and Domestic Programs, PPQ, APHIS, 4700 River Road Unit 26, Riverdale, MD 20737; (301) 734-8723. For copies of more detailed information on the information collection, contact Mrs. Celeste Sickles, APHIS' Information Collection Coordinator, at (301) 851-2908.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Title: Plant Protection and Quarantine; Official Control Program.
OMB Number: 0579-XXXX.

Type of Request: Approval of an information collection.

Abstract: As authorized by the Plant Protection Act (7 U.S.C. 7701 *et seq.*), the Secretary of Agriculture may prohibit or restrict the importation, entry, exportation, or movement in interstate commerce of any plant, plant product, biological control organism, noxious weed, means of conveyance, or other article if the Secretary determines that the prohibition or restriction is necessary to prevent a plant pest or noxious weed from being introduced into or disseminated within the United States. This authority has been delegated to the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS).

As part of this mission, APHIS' Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) program responds to introductions of plant pests to eradicate, suppress, or contain them through various programs to prevent the interstate spread of plant pests. APHIS' plant pest control and eradication programs qualify as "official control programs," as defined by the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC), recognized by the World Trade Organization as the standard-setting body for international plant quarantine issues. "Official control" is defined as "the active enforcement of mandatory phytosanitary regulations and the application of mandatory phytosanitary procedures with the objective of eradication or containment of quarantine pests or for the management of regulated non-quarantine pests." As a contracting party to the IPPC, the United States has agreed to observe IPPC principles as they relate to international trade.

APHIS is aware that individual States enforce phytosanitary regulations and procedures within their borders to address pests of concern, and that those pests are not always also the subject of

an APHIS response program or activity. To strengthen APHIS' safeguarding system to protect agriculture and to facilitate agriculture trade through effective management of phytosanitary measures, APHIS plans to begin a process to allow a State to request Federal recognition of that State's phytosanitary measures or activities as an "official control program" to restrict the spread of plant pests. Federal recognition of a State's pest control activities will justify actions by Federal inspectors at ports of entry to help exclude pests under an official control program in a destination State. This process involves the use of information collection activities, including the submission by States of a protocol for quarantine pests of concern and a protocol for regulated non-quarantine pests.

We are asking the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to approve our use of these information collection activities for 3 years.

The purpose of this notice is to solicit comments from the public (as well as affected agencies) concerning our information collection. These comments will help us:

(1) Evaluate whether the collection of information is necessary for the proper performance of the functions of the Agency, including whether the information will have practical utility;

(2) Evaluate the accuracy of our estimate of the burden of the collection of information, including the validity of the methodology and assumptions used;

(3) Enhance the quality, utility, and clarity of the information to be collected; and

(4) Minimize the burden of the collection of information on those who are to respond, through use, as appropriate, of automated, electronic, mechanical, and other collection technologies; *e.g.*, permitting electronic submission of responses.

Estimate of burden: The public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 80 hours per response.

Respondents: State plant health regulatory officials.

Estimated annual number of respondents: 53.

Estimated annual number of responses per respondent: 25.

Estimated annual number of responses: 1,325.

Estimated total annual burden on respondents: 106,000 hours. (Due to averaging, the total annual burden hours may not equal the product of the annual number of responses multiplied by the reporting burden per response.)

All responses to this notice will be summarized and included in the request for OMB approval. All comments will also become a matter of public record.

Done in Washington, DC, this 4th day of March 2009.

Kevin Shea,

Acting Administrator, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

[FR Doc. E9-5034 Filed 3-9-09; 8:45 am]

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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

[Docket No. APHIS-2008-0143]

Availability of an Environmental Assessment for a Biological Control Agent for Russian Thistle

AGENCY: Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of availability and request for comments.

SUMMARY: We are advising the public that the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service has prepared an environmental assessment relative to the control of Russian thistle, *Salsola tragus*. The environmental assessment considers the effects of, and alternatives to, the release of a nonindigenous blister mite, *Aceria salsolae*, for the biological control of Russian thistle in the continental United States. We are making the environmental assessment available to the public for review and comment.

DATES: We will consider all comments that we receive on or before April 9, 2009.

ADDRESSES: You may submit comments by either of the following methods:

- *Federal eRulemaking Portal:* Go to <http://www.regulations.gov/fdmspublic/component/main?main=DocketDetail&d=APHIS-2008-0143> to submit or view comments and to view supporting and related materials available electronically.

- *Postal Mail/Commercial Delivery:* Please send two copies of your comment to Docket No. APHIS-2008-0143, Regulatory Analysis and Development, PPD, APHIS, Station 3A-03.8, 4700 River Road Unit 118, Riverdale, MD 20737-1238. Please state that your comment refers to Docket No. APHIS-2008-0143.

Reading Room: You may read any comments that we receive on the environmental assessment in our reading room. The reading room is located in room 1141 of the USDA

South Building, 14th Street and Independence Avenue, SW., Washington, DC. Normal reading room hours are 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, except holidays. To be sure someone is there to help you, please call (202) 690-2817 before coming.

Other Information: Additional information about APHIS and its programs is available on the Internet at <http://www.aphis.usda.gov>.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Dr. Carmen Soileau, Senior Entomologist, Evaluation and Permitting of Regulated Organisms and Soil, PPQ, APHIS, 4700 River Road, Unit 133, Riverdale, MD 20737-1237; (301) 734-5055.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Background

The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is proposing to issue permits for release of a nonindigenous blister mite, *Aceria salsolae*, for the biological control of Russian thistle, *Salsola tragus*, in the continental United States.

Russian thistle or tumbleweed, is a highly invasive weed native to the mountainous regions of southwest Asia. Since the introduction of Russian thistle to South Dakota in the early 1870s, it has spread steadily throughout the central and western regions of the United States and southern Canada. It is an agricultural pest that grows primarily in fallow or disturbed soil, along roadsides and irrigation canals, and in waste areas in arid and semiarid zones. During drought periods, it can invade some habitats and displace native species. The infestation of Russian thistle causes millions of dollars of damage by disrupting automobile traffic, clogging irrigation canals, piling up against fences and houses, and igniting and spreading wildfires.

There are currently several control methods for Russian thistle, including herbicides, timed grazing, tilling, and other methods. However, these approaches have proven to be ineffective. Therefore, APHIS is proposing to issue permits for the release of a blister mite, *Aceria salsolae*, into the environment for use as a biological control agent to reduce the severity of Russian thistle infestations in the continental United States.

The proposed biological control agent, *A. salsolae*, is a mite in the insect family Eriophyid and can be found in Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Greece. The mites are usually hidden in crevices of the leaf axils, flowers, and fruits of the Russian thistle. They feed on the target plant by inserting stylets (needle-like mouth

parts) into plant cells and feeding on the cell contents. After about 3 weeks, the leaf meristems (growing tips) die and the mites use the wind to disperse to fresh meristems. Feeding on epidermal cells in meristematic tissue causes cell death of the leaf and flower meristems, thus stunting growth of the plant and delaying and reducing reproduction.

The mite is not expected to directly harm any plants outside the targeted Russian thistle (*sensu lato*). Host specific tests of *A. salsolae* were conducted using a total of 39 species and 12 varieties of host plants from 5 families, including 25 native species of North America. After 4 weeks of laboratory experiments, no live mites were found on any of the nontarget test plants outside the genus *Salsola* and none of the nontarget plants showed any sign of feeding damage. Furthermore, the results clearly show that there was no population increase on these nontarget plant species, particularly in comparison to the population growth observed on Russian thistle.

APHIS' review and analysis of the potential environmental impacts associated with releasing a biological control agent, *A. salsolae*, into the environment are documented in detail in an environmental assessment (EA) entitled "Field Release of *Aceria salsolae* (Acari: Eriophyidae), a Mite for Biological Control of Russian Thistle (*Salsola tragus*), in the Continental United States" (October 2008). We are making the EA available to the public for review and comment. We will consider all comments that we receive on or before the date listed under the heading **DATES** at the beginning of this notice.

The EA may be viewed on the Regulations.gov Web site or in our reading room (see **ADDRESSES** above for instructions for accessing *Regulations.gov* and information on the location and hours of the reading room). You may request paper copies of the EA by calling or writing to the person listed under **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT**. Please refer to the title of the EA when requesting copies.

The EA has been prepared in accordance with: (1) The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), as amended (42 U.S.C. 4321 *et seq.*), (2) regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality for implementing the procedural provisions of NEPA (40 CFR parts 1500-1508), (3) USDA regulations implementing NEPA (7 CFR part 1), and (4) APHIS' NEPA Implementing Procedures (7 CFR part 372).

Done in Washington, DC, this 4th day of March 2009.

Kevin Shea,

Acting Administrator, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

[Docket No. APHIS-2008-0142]

Availability of an Environmental Assessment for a Biological Control Agent for Yellow Starthistle

AGENCY: Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of availability and request for comments.

SUMMARY: We are advising the public that the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service has prepared an environmental assessment relative to the control of yellow starthistle, *Centaurea solstitialis* (Asteraceae). The environmental assessment considers the effects of, and alternatives to, the release of a weevil, *Ceratopion basicorne*, into the environment for use as a biological control agent to reduce the severity of yellow starthistle infestations in the continental United States. We are making the environmental assessment available to the public for review and comment.

DATES: We will consider all comments that we receive on or before April 9, 2009.

ADDRESSES: You may submit comments by either of the following methods:

- *Federal eRulemaking Portal:* Go to <http://www.regulations.gov/fdmspublic/component/main?main=DocketDetail&d=APHIS-2008-0142> to submit or view comments and to view supporting and related materials available electronically.

- *Postal Mail/Commercial Delivery:* Please send two copies of your comment to Docket No. APHIS-2008-0142, Regulatory Analysis and Development, PPD, APHIS, Station 3A-03.8, 4700 River Road Unit 118, Riverdale, MD 20737-1238. Please state that your comment refers to Docket No. APHIS-2008-0142.

Reading Room: You may read any comments that we receive on the environmental assessment in our reading room. The reading room is located in room 1141 of the USDA South Building, 14th Street and Independence Avenue, SW.,