

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.

[FR Doc. E9-5043 Filed 3-9-09; 8:45 am]

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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.,

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 weevil, *Ceratapion basicorne*, into the environment for use as a biological control agent to reduce the severity of yellow starthistle infestations in the continental United States.

Yellow starthistle is a highly invasive weed that has become one of California's worst pests since its introduction prior to 1860. Since then, it has been reported in 41 of the 48 contiguous U.S. States, with the heaviest infestations in the States of California, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. Yellow starthistle infests grassland habitats and displaces desirable plants in both natural and grazing areas. Its flowers have inch-long spines that deter feeding by and cause injury to grazing animals and lower the utility of recreational lands. Although consumption of yellow starthistle by grazing animals is rare, consumption by horses is toxic. Continued feeding causes ulcers in the mouth and results in brain lesions that cause a fatal syndrome known as "chewing disease" or nigropallidal encephalomalacia.

There are currently several control methods for yellow starthistle, including herbicides, mowing, timed grazing, prescribed burns, and other methods. However, these control methods have proven to be ineffective. Therefore, APHIS is proposing to issue permits for the release of a weevil, *Ceratapion basicorne*, into the environment for use as a biological control agent to reduce the severity of yellow starthistle infestations in the continental United States.

The proposed biological control agent, *C. basicorne*, is native to Europe and southwestern Asia. The weevil has a wide tolerance to climate and is therefore expected to become established throughout the range of

yellow starthistle if released in the United States. Female *C. basicorne* lay their eggs in the yellow starthistle leaves from late March to early May. The eggs hatch after approximately 10 days. The larvae then mine in the leaf blade and down the leaf stalk. During the following 2 months, the larvae feed in the root crown while they develop. Adults emerge in June, feed on the yellow starthistle leaves for a few days, and then disappear. Field impact studies in California show that plants infested with *C. basicorne* have slower growth rates and decreased seed production compared to uninfested plants.

Host specificity tests indicate that no plant species outside the subtribe Centaureinae are at risk of larval damage. The closest native species to yellow starthistle are *C. americana* and *C. rothrockii*, but they were not able to maintain larval development of *C. basicorne*. Test results also indicate that there may be low attack and larval damage to *C. melitensis*, *Crupino vulgaris*, *Cnicus benedictus*, and *C. cyanus*, but risk of attack was not measured in specificity experiments because there is no interest to protect these invasive species in North America. Based on these results, release of *C. basicorne* in the continental United States is not expected to have any negative cumulative impacts.

APHIS' review and analysis of the potential environmental impacts associated with the proposed action are documented in detail in an environmental assessment (EA) entitled "Field Release of *Ceratapion basicorne* (Coleoptera: Apionidae), a Weevil for Biological Control of Yellow Starthistle (*Centaurea solstitialis*), 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

Commodity Credit Corporation

Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative

AGENCY: Commodity Credit Corporation, Department of Agriculture (USDA).

ACTION: Notice of request for proposals; request for public comment.

SUMMARY: Section 2707 of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (2008 Act) establishes the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) by amending Section 1243 of the Food Security Act of 1985 [16 U.S.C. 3843]. The Secretary of Agriculture has delegated the authority for CCPI to the Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), who is a Vice President of the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC). NRCS is an agency of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Congress established CCPI to assist potential partners with focusing conservation assistance in defined project areas to achieve high-priority natural resource objectives. In fiscal year (FY) 2009, NRCS will make Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) funds available to owners and operators of agricultural and nonindustrial private forest lands who will participate in CCPI projects.

The purpose of this notice is to inform potential partners and producers that include nonindustrial private forest landowners of the availability of CCPI funds and other assistance and to solicit proposals from potential partners who seek to enter into partnership agreements with NRCS to enhance conservation outcomes on agricultural and nonindustrial private forest land.

Additionally, NRCS requests public comment on how CCPI can contribute to the Nation's efforts on energy, climate change, and carbon sequestration within the framework of the Initiative.