

National invasive species panel gets a look at Alaska

The introduction of foreign species into Alaska could threaten ecosystems and damage fishing, subsistence, hunting and tourism industries. For the first time ever, the Invasive Species Advisory Committee met in Anchorage for a week-long summit. The committee, based in Washington, holds meetings in locations across the United States, in order to get a first-hand look at the issues at hand.

The committee is composed of stakeholders from state organizations, industry, conservation groups, scientists, academia and other interests from across the U.S. It

advises the National Invasive Species Council, an inter-departmental body that helps coordinate federal action on invasive species.

Lori Williams, the executive director of the national council, said that, given the absence of any huge problems with invasive species in Alaska to date, she was impressed by the level of effort on the part of volunteers and agency experts to confront the issue here.

"Even though it's a small number of people and the programs are relatively small, everyone was on the right track and knew what the issues were," Williams said. "They were very aware of their challenges."



The council's Lisa Ka'aihue and Jeff Heys of the National Park Service worked to bring the Invasive Species Advisory Committee meeting to Alaska.



The Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council has held a seat on the Invasive Species Advisory Committee since 2000.

Council Director of Administration Lisa Ka'aihue worked primarily with Jeff Heys of the National Park Service to bring the Invasive Species Advisory Committee meeting to Alaska, in an effort to collaborate on invasive species prevention and to share information about the latest legislation, technologies and progress in the fight against invasive species across the U.S.

While Alaska is threatened by many invasive species, including Norwegian rat populations in the Aleutian Islands and several invasive weeds through the state, the council has taken a particular interest in species that could hitchhike their way into Prince William Sound on or inside the hull of an oil tanker.

The transport of coastal organisms in ballast water has been a major concern for invasions in recent years. Port Valdez ranks third in the United States for ballast water discharge, putting it at high risk for invasion.

Hull fouling is another focus of the council with regard to invasive species. Hull fouling involves organisms such as barnacles or mussels

attaching themselves to ship hulls and either coming in contact with structures in a new port or releasing larvae into the water.

A critical issue for the council is the fact that the National Invasive Species Act of 1996 exempts crude oil tankers in the Alaska North Slope trade from ballast water exchange requirements. Ballast water exchange is a technique to remove coastal organisms from ballast tanks by replacing the seawater taken on in port with open-ocean seawater.

The council is currently working on several projects to defend the Sound from invasive species, including monitoring for the European green crab, partnering with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to identify and record hull fouling on large ships, and working with the University of Washington to develop hull sampling methods, focusing on oil tankers in particular.

Several invasive-species bills are before Congress, some addressing ballast-water management. The council has submitted comments in favor of bills that remove a trade exemption that includes Alaska tankers sailing to domestic ports, currently exempt from ballast water regulations that require exchange and reporting.

At the state level, the council has been active in the Alaska Invasive Species Working Group to coordinate efforts and push forward issues of concern.

For more information on invasive species, visit www.adfg.state.ak.us and look for the invasive species link under News & Issues. Or, visit the citizens' council website, www.pwsrcc.org.