

National Invasive Species Awareness Week is January 10<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup>

"Invasive species are one of our most significant problems in a global economy," said Lee Van Wychen, PhD, science policy director of the Weed Science Society of America. "But despite the threat, we have yet to see adequate resources applied to the problem. We hope to build a grassroots network to highlight the issues involved and to generate action on a cohesive national management plan and funding."

A coalition of public and private scientists, educators and policy officials will gather in Washington, D.C. for a four-day summit. Scheduled during National Invasive Species Awareness Week (NISAW), January 10-14, the conference will focus on how invasive species are related to climate change, biofuels and an emerging "green" economy. The meeting is designed to promote awareness of the problem and to build support for a cohesive invasive species management plan.

According to KS Lawrence, "When left unmanaged, harmful nonnative species can destroy wildlife and fish habitats, reduce the diversity of our natural resources, and cause major losses in agriculture, forestry and other segments of the U.S. economy. Researchers at Cornell University have estimated the annual toll at \$120 billion. Even homeowners feel the impact of invasive species as ornamentals introduced to the U.S. from other countries become invasive in their new habitat."

On January 9<sup>th</sup>, the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District (HSWCD) held their first Air Potato Exchange Day in an effort to raise public awareness about the problem that invasive exotic plants and animals are causing our county. Many other organizations are encouraging people to get involved with this increasingly alarming issue. The Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council awarded HSWCD a grant to help reduce the amount of this problematic plant. Four free seminars were offered to educate the citizens of Highlands County about air potato as well as other problem species. These presentations informed citizens about ways to recognize the plant, methods of eradication, instructions on treatment and general tips on why these invasive exotic plants and animals are so bad for our natural world. On January 9<sup>th</sup> folks brought in bags of air potato bulbs to exchange for a free native plant.

The long term goals of the scientists, educators and officials in Washington are the same as ours. We all need to team up together to minimize the impact of invasive species in a time of rapid, global change. We can do this by putting a higher prioritization and increased resources for invasive species management on public and private lands and waters. New, improved laws and policies need to be developed to prevent the introduction and spread of invasive species within the U.S. Rapid access to credible scientific data and timely application to policy and management decision-making must be achieved. And perhaps most importantly, effective coalitions and networks focusing on invasive species issues need to be organized.

This problem is one we all share. Each citizen can assist in the efforts to battle these invaders of our natural areas. Neighborhood task forces could band together and

battle these persistent pests. For more information on getting involved, please call me at (863) 402-6545. Together, we can battle these aggressive monsters and keep our county pristine and beautiful.