



PRESS RELEASE

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Brown Treesnake Emergency Response Plan

State and federal agencies are working together to protect Hawaii and Rota (Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands) from the increased threat of invasion by brown treesnakes. The super typhoon that devastated Guam severely limited the USDA-Wildlife Service's ability to keep brown treesnakes from crawling into cargo and vessels bound for these snake-free islands.

In Hawaii, an emergency meeting was held on Tuesday December 12th to review snake search and prevention protocol, and look at the resources available for these enhanced response procedures. Participating in the meeting were representatives from the Hawaii Department of Agriculture (HDOA), FEMA, USDA - Wildlife Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) - Law Enforcement, USFWS - Ecological Services, Navy, Air Force, and Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources. The enhanced brown treesnake interdiction program is based on inter-agency cooperation, the sharing of resources, and public vigilance.

HDOA has five detector dogs and is working to put together snake refresher training. "The dogs have not been trained with brown treesnakes for awhile, though we have been using other snake species. We are working with USDA- Wildlife Services to bring in a male brown treesnake to refresh the dogs with that species," reported Neil Reimer of HDOA. The Dogs are used to search cargo that has been removed from aircraft while the interiors of vessels and wheel wells are searched visually.

The department is contemplating some emergency-hires and will conduct intensive training to build capacity quickly, with the assistance of its federal counterpart, USDA-APHIS. For the time being, the primary tool that will be used for searching snakes in planes or ships is visual inspection until the dogs and inspectors are completely ready.

“Our concern is that with an increase in the amount of cargo due to the relief efforts we may not be able to use dogs on 100% of the cargo as we have to date, and the amount of inspectors available to visually inspect aircraft will also need to be increased. That is why we asked for help from other agencies,” said Reimer. However, with the complexity of products being shipped and the types of areas that require searching, visual inspection is labor intensive and not the most comprehensive method. USDA Wildlife Services, USDA Plant and Pest Quarantine, and FWS-Law Enforcement have volunteered to assist HDOA with visual inspections for snakes.

Training will also be conducted in the next few weeks for state, federal and county agency officials responding to snake sightings. “There are a limited number of people with experience with brown treesnakes in Hawaii. The bottom line is we need more expertise on snake-related issues in the state,” said Earl Campbell, Invasive Species Coordinator for the USFWS - Pacific Islands Eco-Region Office.

On Guam, USDA Wildlife Services officials think that they may be able to get eleven snake-detecting dogs and their handlers back to work in the next few days, and 60% of the 3,200 snake traps repaired in the coming week. Depending on the program status, traps and temporary snake barriers from USDA wildlife Services and the Department of Defense will be set around cargo, planes and ships bound for Hawaii and Rota (CNMI). However, the program will need to get additional essential supplies in the near future in order to function. One issue is that gasoline is unavailable to all but the most essential relief efforts and this will limit the ability of USDA Wildlife Services to get its quarantine program up and running.

The immediate goal of USDA Wildlife Services will be to get small-scale quarantine sites constructed and incorporated into FEMA, DOD, and commercial efforts on Guam. USDA-APHIS has approved \$227,000 as initial funds for Wildlife Services program operation and will grant additional funds for humanitarian assistance to staff.

At greatest risk from brown treesnake invasion is the island of Rota, which was also hit by the typhoon. FEMA will ship relief materials from Guam to Rota and does not have brown treesnake quarantine issues incorporated into its standard operating procedures, and the USDA Wildlife Services brown treesnake program on Rota is also greatly diminished.

“We would appreciate being informed about any known or planned flight schedules to Rota from Guam and the level or amount of relief supplies. This will allow the CNMI to notify the team of trained visual inspectors, at the very least, that will meet relief supplies for inspection,” said Nate Hawley, a herpetologist and the brown treesnake supervisor for CNMI-Saipan. “We would also like to request emergency funding from FEMA and other federal agencies in processing a travel request for trained brown treesnake inspectors to meet relief cargo in Rota.”

“We are pleased that FEMA participated in the emergency meeting in Honolulu,” Campbell said. “I think that FEMA will work to address this issue with the current crisis and that brown treesnake interdiction procedures will be incorporated into any future relief efforts.”

One tool that is effective on a broad scale is public education. “We are asking everybody that deals with goods or cargo originating from Guam to be aware of the risk of brown treesnakes, the snake's biology, and what to do if a snake is sighted—kill it, then call for help once it is dead.”

He added, “Be careful. Kill it, but be careful.” Snake reports can be made to the Pest Hotline, 586-PEST (7378).

Brown treesnakes were introduced to Guam in the late 1940’s or early 1950’s and within 20 years they decimated Guam’s native and alien bird fauna. Population densities have been recorded at 40 snakes per acre. The snakes have switched prey to lizards and skinks in the absence of their preferred prey. Additionally, these venomous snakes will bite people, preferring infants. Brown treesnakes cause an average of one power outage every four days as they climb on wires. The cost (to public health, agriculture and electrical industry) could add up to \$400 million in annual costs to Hawaii if these snakes were to become established.

CGAPS is a statewide partnership of government agencies and NGOs working together to close the gaps in Hawaii’s biosecurity. CGAPS partners meet regularly to discuss the most threatening alien pests, current actions on existing pests, and plan protection systems capable of detecting and keeping out the next silent invader.

The Invasive Species Committees are grassroots partnerships of government agencies, private businesses and non-profit organizations working together to control or eradicate the worst pest species that threaten each island. The ISCs are:

Kauai Invasive Species Committee (KISC)

Oahu Invasive Species Committee (OISC)

Maui Invasive Species Committee (MISC) and the Molokai subcommittee MoMISC

Big Island Invasive Species Committee (BIISC)

For more information on CGAPS or the ISCs, visit www.hear.org

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