

Committee: Environment and Transportation

Testimony on: HB979 “Agriculture - Invasive Plant Species - Regulation (Biodiversity and Agriculture Protection Act)”

Position: Favorable

Hearing Date: February 28, 2024

William P. Mays
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Dear Delegates,

I am William Mays, owner/operator of Beech Spring Farm in Nelson County Va. The farm produces high quality Red Angus/Balancer genetics and includes forest land that produces hardwood timber. This farm has been in our family for almost one hundred years but we have ancestors that owned this farm dating to the late 1700’s. I urge a favorable report on House Bill 979.

As a full time farmer and Farm Bureau President for many years I am sharing my personal testimony with you in hopes that it can shed light on the devastating effects certain invasive species have on our working lands. The farm consists of upland pastures/hayfields and forested mountain land situated in the headwaters of several tributaries of the Tye and Piney River watersheds. The land has been productive for generations.

As a young boy growing up on the farm I watched as multi flora rose and kudzu (which were introduced by the government programs in the 1950’s) spread across our property. To this day they are still a problem even after many decades of measures to control them. There are many invasive species that have become established on our acreage since that time. Just to name a few: Chinese Privet, Japanese Honeysuckle , Tree of Heaven, Perillo Mint, Japanese Stiltgrass and Fountaingrass. Of these the most threatening by far is Cenchrus or fountaingrass. While many invasives are non-commercial Cenchrus is commercial and widely distributed in the nursery trade as an ornamental grass. Around ten years ago a neighboring landowner planted a small area in their yard with Cenchrus/purpurascens. From that planting in ten years it has spread onto hundreds of adjoining acres. This grass is a perennial warm season clump grass originating from Asia and will easily out compete any cool-season perennial grass. There are now significant areas of monoculture establishment of this grass which is severely impacting the production of quality forage on our farm. Currently there are no controls for this grass other than round-up herbicide that are labeled for pasture use. So a complete kill and many years of renovation would be needed to eradicate Cenchrus. Since these pastures are uplands and on marginal land that is highly erodible it presents a very difficult problem to mitigate. Aside from the loss of production, cost of renovation, along with the likelihood of losing valuable top soil and releasing years of stored carbon there is a devaluing of our property. All this adds up to be an overwhelming burden on any farmer or landowner facing these problems. At seventy years old and after spending my life working on this acreage it is destined to become a monoculture of a non-native invasive grass species that is worthless and extremely detrimental to the landscape unless I take radical steps to eradicate it. There are many like me with similar stories. The proliferation of these known invasives onto the landscape without regard for the consequences they cause by the nursery industry needs to stop now. I and many others urge a favorable report on HB979.

Respectfully,
William P. Mays