

## **Legislative Testimony**

### **Allegheny Forest Health Collaborative Tour Testimony Session**

**PA House Policy Committee**

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**Michael Hovatter**

**Pennsylvania Regional Forester  
LandVest, Inc., Ridgway, PA**

#### **Impacts of Invasive Species on Forest Health and Management- Private Forests**

Good afternoon. My name is Michael Hovatter, and I am the Regional Forester for LandVest, based out of Ridgway, PA. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I am here to speak about the real-world impacts and challenges of managing invasive species across the varied public, private, industrial and investment ownerships of the Allegheny Plateau. As managers of very large, forested acreages in northwest and north central Pennsylvania, LandVest is proud to be an active member of the Allegheny Forest Health Collaborative. The AFHC is working to improve forest health on a landscape level; a big job. Working together with neighboring landowners is really the best approach to many forest issues. Invasive species are a perfect example of a problem that requires landscape level solutions.

To review, if you didn't have the opportunity to participate in this morning's tour:

Invasive species are a serious threat to ecosystems in PA, and nationwide. Specifically, non-native plants are those that are not native to an area, spread quickly, and cause economic and environmental harm or harm to human health. Invasive plants have been introduced into new areas through landscaping, recreation, movement by people or animals; both accidentally or on purpose. They take over habitats and natural areas where native species grow. Exotic species have nothing to limit their growth, like diseases, insects or herbivores. They grow in ecosystems separate from these limitations which would keep them in check in their native land. In PA there are over 285 invasive plant species. According to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the U.S. spends more than 120 billion dollars controlling invasive species each year.

The environmental detriments of the many species of invasive plants and insects on our forests are great. Foresters and land managers working on private tracts of land have to balance the need to treat and contain these species with the need to operate within budgetary constraints. These working forests are managed for forest health, but also to be profitable long-term

investments. Sustainable management supports periodic harvests that provide saleable logs and other forest products, while continuing to improve forest health for the future.

Invasive species, such as the glossy buckthorn we saw this morning, greatly impact forest health and cost companies and landowners money. Treating a stand heavily impacted by invasives, with the goal of regenerating a new forest within a reasonable timeframe, can cost more than \$200 per acre and multiple attempts. These costs often exceed the anticipated return on investment and make the stand nearly unmanageable from an economic standpoint. Private investors are often unable to invest large sums of money in the invasive and vegetation management of a property without assurance that this work will be successful in achieving the desired forest health and providing return on investment within a reasonable ownership period. Smaller private landowners have even bigger financial challenges in attempting to treat invasives. Owners of public lands may not necessarily need to make a profit from their forests but they, too, have budgetary constraints that limit their ability to effectively manage difficult invasive infestations.

The challenges in the field are very real today. Our tour highlighted a few examples of the local issues with invasive plants. Managers need to make decisions today about whether to treat or not treat - based not on whether they care about eliminating invasives, but on whether they can afford to treat and on whether their efforts will be impactful based on the scope of the problem on their own and neighboring properties. While glossy buckthorn is one of the biggest problems on local Landvest properties, other species causing serious forest health concerns across the Allegheny region (and statewide) include Japanese barberry, mile-a-minute, Oriental bittersweet, Japanese knotweed, Goatsrue and Japanese stiltgrass. Beech bark disease is also of great concern. The list is long and the impact is staggering. Information gathered by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania suggests that the economic impact of invasive species is more than \$100 million per year in Pennsylvania, and nearly \$120 billion nationwide.

Regardless of ownership (public or private), we manage today's forests with an eye on creating the healthy forests of tomorrow. As you have seen today, invasive species can seriously impede forest regeneration that could have effects 50-100 years from now. New trees cannot grow in the shade of invasive plants and shrubs, which means our forests cannot regenerate.

While my testimony primarily addresses invasive plants, I also want to mention the ongoing forest health problems with invasive insects. As you may know, the spongy (previously gypsy) moth is expected to have serious impacts statewide for the second year in a row after defoliating more than 400,000 acres of state forest lands in 2021. Emerald ash borer has decimated the ash trees, with nearly 200 million board feet of annual tree mortality. Healthy ash is now almost non-existent in most of PA. Spotted lanternfly, while not in most of the AFHC area, is on its way, economically impacting fruit producers and potentially having future impact

on forested area. Hemlock woolly adelgid is and will continue to have serious impacts to Eastern hemlock populations across the state.

Solutions to these problems are challenging. Decisions at the policy level need to be considered carefully to address the work that needs to be done to stay ahead of invasive species, both plant and pest. Working with partners through the Allegheny Forest Health Collaborative and others in pursuit of landscape level management and treatment tactics is beneficial. AIPMA (Allegheny Plateau Invasive Plant Management Area) specifically addresses non-native invasive plants within a 5-county area of the Collaborative footprint, getting education, mapping and treatment efforts accomplished on the ground. The proposed PRISM program will further benefit invasive work, allowing new and existing partnerships to become even more effective in addressing landscape level forest health concerns. Funding for treatment is vital and must be available to all types of property ownership in order to achieve landscape level response. The truth is that we can't eliminate all invasive plants or pests; but a concerted effort to prevent their spread into new areas and management to keep them at a reasonable level to protect forests and ecosystems is very important. This will take ongoing planning, collaboration and funds. Early detection, rapid response and prioritized treatment projects need to happen now, not years from now. We are already behind and more time for these species to grow and spread will cost us dearly in forest health and economics. Ultimately, invasive species do not respect property lines, making this everyone's problem.

Thank you for your time and I will answer any questions you may have.