

# **Introduced (Invasive) Plant Pest Species Related Language Review**

Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets

Plant Health Section

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## **Summary**

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture's Plant Health Section is dedicated to protecting the state's plant resources while promoting sustainable management practices through an inclusive and holistic approach. Recognizing the power of language in shaping public attitudes and behaviors, the section has undertaken a significant revision of historically exclusionary, combative, and sometimes racist terminology used in invasive ecology. By adopting more accurate, neutral, and respectful language, the Plant Health Section aims to better reflect the complexities of species introductions and avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes. This effort not only respects and aligns with Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge by emphasizing stewardship over conflict but also aligns with the VT Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets broader commitment to Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accountability. The Plant Health Section will make an internal transition to using the term "introduced" with specific qualifiers instead of "invasive," recognizing that language shapes perceptions and informs the strategies we use to manage ecological challenges. This intentional shift in language is aimed at fostering a sense of belonging, enhancing community involvement, and promoting a scientifically sound and socially just approach to the agency's plant health related responsibilities.

## **Introduction: Moving Away from "Invasive" Language**

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture's Plant Health Section is committed to protecting Vermont's plant resources from pests and diseases while promoting sustainable plant management practices. The Plant Health Section recognizes that an inclusive approach to plant protection is essential and prioritizes involving diverse perspectives when developing strategies to address challenges presented by introduced invasive plant pest species. The Plant Health Section understands this is an ongoing national conversation, and that, typically language change is an organic and unpredictable process. However, the Plant Health Section is committed to using the least harmful language currently available, even if these efforts aren't perfect. This paper presents the Plant Health Section's rationale for reviewing and intentionally revising some of the historical language used in the field of invasive ecology, which has often been exclusionary, racist, and combative.

Language is key in shaping our understanding of and attitudes towards complicated ecological challenges, and the words used to describe them shape public understanding and behavior. The way we discuss ecological concerns can sometimes limit our ability to have conversations that include everyone's viewpoints. Using certain combative metaphors and terms like "war," "defend," and "invasion" frames the issue as a battle between humans and nature and oversimplifies incredibly complex ecological issues into binary conflicts.

Outdated language can unconsciously mirror xenophobic and racist attitudes towards people who are seen as “others” and unintentionally echoes exclusionary attitudes towards immigrants and strategically undervalued communities, reinforcing discriminatory attitudes. Words like "foreign" and "invaders" have historically been used to justify actions against groups perceived as outsiders, influencing public opinion and response. Similarly, in environmental work, non-indigenous species are labeled with terms like "invasive" and "alien," often based on their place of origin. Changing some of the language we use when talking about introduced and highly competitive species is essential for addressing unintentional racism, bias and xenophobia. The language we use and the way issues are framed in the Plant Health Section can deeply influence public opinion and behavior while also reinforcing harmful stereotypes. (1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 17, 19, 21)

By acknowledging the power of language to affect attitudes, inform understanding and influence behaviors the Plant Health Section aims to adopt more factually accurate, neutral, respectful, and collaborative terminology whenever possible. This change goes beyond just replacing terminology; it is a critical step to cultivating a more scientifically sound, holistic and socially just approach to this work. (3, 7, 16, 21)

### **Adopting “Introduced” Language**

The Plant Health Section will use the term “introduced” as a neutral label, adding descriptors like “highly competitive” or “benign” to clarify the potential impacts of species instead of using “invasive”. Using the same word for different audiences does not have to be mutually exclusive; rather, it allows the word to serve multiple purposes depending on the audience. By tailoring the language to the specific needs and understanding of different groups, we can communicate more effectively while still preserving the word's significance across various contexts. For example, using the term "introduced" for a general audience might focus on the basic concept of a species being new to an area, while for the scientific community, it could encompass more detailed ecological implications. This approach ensures clarity without diminishing the word's importance or meaning in other settings. (1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 13)

The Plant Health Section acknowledges that scientists and practitioners often use the term "introduced" to refer to species moved to new areas by human activities, whether they cause harm or not, and the word "invasive" is used to specifically describe those that spread rapidly and cause significant ecological, economic, or health damage. There are those who are hesitant to replace "invasive" with "introduced" because of their belief that using neutral language may downplay the serious impacts associated with highly competitive introduced species. However, the assumption that neutral language leads to a weak response ignores how language shapes public perception and action.

The word "invasive" has been leveraged to convey a sense of urgency about managing these species and has been widely recognized in both scientific and policy contexts, and in the professional field of natural resource management. Research shows that clear, respectful, and accurate terms can still drive urgency without relying on fear or combative tones. Studies have shown that urgency can be effectively created through positive and transparent communication, which highlights the benefits and opportunities of acting without using aggressive tactics. Terms that are neutral and accurate can still prompt people to act swiftly, if the messaging is clear and focuses on the importance of an issue. (25, 21, 6, 7, 12, 16, 17, 13)

Using "introduced" instead of "invasive" highlights human responsibility in species spread, encouraging shared stewardship rather than framing it as a battle between humans and nature. This approach promotes thoughtful, long-term ecological solutions and builds stronger public engagement by fostering a deeper understanding of the human role in managing these challenges. This choice of words provides a more truthful and precise description to the public. (1, 5, 6, 8, 21)

### **Framing the Narrative: The Role of Language in Environmental Perception and Action**

Strong language concerning introduced species, like using urgent or dramatic terms, can drive action but might also lead to biased views. An example of strong language concerning introduced plant species can be seen in how the Himalayan balsam is often described in media and conservation materials in Europe. It is frequently labeled as an "invasive monster" or "ecological nightmare" due to its rapid spread and ability to dominate habitats. The language used to describe the species frames the plant as an enemy and fosters an adversarial mindset. Each fall, UK conservationists organize an event called 'balsam bashing' to try to stop its spread. This type of messaging can detract from more balanced discussions about the ecological complexities and human roles in the spread of these kinds of species. When the role humans play in spreading species globally is recognized, it breaks down the harmful "us vs. them" and "good vs. evil" thinking that often surrounds introduced species. It also challenges the idea that dealing with these species is a war with battles to win or lose, which can limit how the public views and responds to the issue. (1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 22)

“Framing” involves mental structures that guide our understanding of the world. These frames are triggered by specific words and metaphors, which can evoke emotions and shape how we think about an issue. How we frame concepts can tap into people's core values and beliefs, influencing their perceptions and actions. This makes it very important to choose our words carefully, as language has the profound ability to shape public conversation and societal attitudes. (16, 18, 21)

Language strongly affects how people and society view and react to environmental issues. The way we talk about these challenges can either encourage or discourage public involvement. Positive messages focusing on teamwork and shared responsibility have been proven to be more effective at promoting environmentally friendly behaviors than messages based on fear or guilt. Using hopeful and cooperative language can lead to more meaningful actions and greater community involvement. (16, 19, 21)

The words and metaphors we use can greatly impact the strategies people and policymakers choose. Describing highly competitive introduced species with terms like "enemy," and "devastating" may lead to aggressive and short-term solutions. In contrast, using more holistic and less combative language can promote long-term strategies focused on restoration and care. Shifting from conflict to collaboration improves ecological outcomes and strengthens public support. This collaboration lessens ecological harm and strengthens a societal ethos of care and coexistence. (1,2,6)

Using language that focuses on "restoration," "stewardship," and "management" opens the door to more creative and collaborative approaches. This mindset allows us to address not just the immediate effects of some introduced species but also the larger ecological, social, and economic impacts. (1, 2, 8, 17)

## **Meeting the Plant Health Section's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Goals:**

### **VT Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets: Commitment to Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accountability**

Carefully choosing and revising specific words aligns with concepts reflected in Indigenous [Traditional Ecological Knowledge](#), which emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life and encourages stewardship over conflict. Violent and aggressive terms often push aside traditional knowledge that values balance, coexistence, and respect for all species. By using more respectful and inclusive language, The Plant Health Section can integrate these values, leading to culturally competent and well-rounded solutions. This approach respects Indigenous knowledge, improves biodiversity conservation, and ecosystem sustainability by including diverse viewpoints, especially when the Plant Health Section faces an introduced species challenge. (1, 4, 13, 14, 15, 22)

Inclusive language can bridge the gap between different cultural and social groups, allowing for more collaborative and effective solution making. By moving away from combative language and adopting terms that emphasize stewardship and working together, we can communicate to the public that we recognize that diverse voices and perspectives are not only welcomed but are essential to the success of environmental efforts. (1, 2, 8, 17)

## **Conclusion**

An intentional shift to using more descriptively accurate and less emotionally activating language will send a powerful and meaningful message to all Vermonters, especially those who have felt excluded or harmed by racism and xenophobia. It demonstrates that the agency values diversity and is committed to creating a more inclusive and just Vermont. For those who have felt excluded and harmed by historical terminology, updated language acknowledges their experiences and contributions, affirming that they are seen, valued, and belong in Vermont.

The VT Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets recognizes that expanding how we talk about introduced species creates space for more perspectives and solutions. By using language that emphasizes cooperation, restoration, and stewardship, we invite more thoughtful, inclusive strategies that benefit both our communities and ecosystems. This shift ensures that we address current challenges while building a more sustainable future, rooted in diverse viewpoints and a holistic approach.

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