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WILDLIFE SERVICES—U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS

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USDA Resolves Wildlife Conflicts in the U.S. Virgin Islands

The U.S. Virgin Islands encompass a series of Caribbean islands including St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix, currently governed as a U.S. Territory. The Islands boast a unique mix of tropical habitats and associated wildlife species. Wildlife Services (WS) projects are managed out of the Alabama State WS office and include minimizing wildlife/aircraft conflicts at island airports and managing invasive species such as mongoose and black rats on National Park Service lands.

Top 5 Major Assistance Activities:

- Protecting passengers and aircraft from collisions with wildlife
- Protecting threatened and endangered species
- Managing populations of invasive species
- Protecting livestock through cooperative efforts to monitor for the presence of the cattle bont tick
- Protecting human health and safety from roosting birds

Major WS Research Projects of Interest to the U.S. Virgin Islands:

- Defining and reducing wildlife hazards to aviation
- Managing rodents and introduced vertebrate pest species
- Developing chemistry-based tools for wildlife damage management
- Improving assessment, sampling, and economic methods for wildlife damage management

Applying Science & Expertise to Wildlife Challenges

WS offers information, advice, equipment, and materials that enable many people to resolve wildlife conflicts on their own. Often, this *technical assistance* can be provided over the phone. WS also provides on-site expertise, or *direct assistance*, to manage complex wildlife problems that cannot be safely resolved by others. To support this effort, WS conducts *scientific research* across the Nation to develop answers to new problems posed by wildlife and to ensure the program benefits from the latest science and technology.

While WS conducts a wide range of operational and research activities, these few in-depth examples highlight WS' role in protecting public health and safety, and agricultural and natural resources.

Invasive Species Management—In addition to recently completing a non-native black rat control project on Buck Island National Monument with the U.S. Park Service, WS provides the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Virgin Islands Division of Fish and Wildlife with technical assistance to manage invasive species. Control of non-native rats, feral pigs, and mongoose populations are underway at the Virgin Islands National Park on St. John and several small islands off the coast of St. Thomas in cooperative efforts with those natural resource agencies. Invasive,



or non-native, species are damaging native flora and fauna on many of the local islands. If left alone, these foreign rat and mongoose populations damage rare and sensitive native

vegetation and limit the reproduction of endangered sea turtles and migratory birds.

Before WS implemented wildlife damage management measures at Buck Island National Monument, rats were destroying eggs and eating the young turtle hatchlings as they emerged. Since WS completed its efforts, the island vegetation and native wildlife have already begun to show signs of restoration. WS continues to monitor Buck Island to ensure that rats do not become reestablished.

Protecting Air Travel—Every year, lives are endangered worldwide and billions of dollars are wasted when birds and other wildlife damage aircraft. Experts estimate that wildlife strikes with airplanes cost U.S. civil aviation industry more than \$550 million annually in the United States. WS' National Wildlife Research Center (NWRC) conducts research from its Sandusky, OH Field Station to reduce wildlife hazards to

aviation and to reduce risks to the public. Studies are underway at several large airports where scientists evaluate habitat management practices and wildlife dispersal techniques. NWRC also maintains the National Wildlife Strike Database used by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and airports to monitor trends and wildlife species of greatest concern to aviation.

Tourism represents the biggest industry in the Virgin Islands with most visitors arriving by air at the two major airports on St. Thomas and St. John. Both airports are located immediately adjacent to the coast and have numerous bird species using the area around the airports. WS has cooperated with the FAA and the Virgin Islands Port Authority to conduct wildlife hazard evaluations. WS has also provided management plans and recommendations to successfully reduce the presence of wildlife at these facilities and better protect passengers and aircraft from the hazards associated with bird strikes.

A second issue that faces the region is the impact of invasive species on native plants and animals. These problems are significant and growing rapidly. Local and Federal agencies are doing some work with limited local funding and grants, but the problems are continuing to grow. Partnerships with the National Park Service and Virgin Islands Fish and Wildlife Service have enhanced WS ability to provide assistance with these problems. A greater need remains, however, if WS is to adequately protect native species.

Virgin Islands Wildlife Services Funding

In addition to receiving federally allocated funds, WS also receives money from cooperators such as producers; private individuals; businesses; and other Federal, State, and local government agencies who have a vested interest in the program. In most cases, these cooperators need help to resolve wildlife damage problems or they play a role in wildlife damage management.

Major Cooperators

- National Park Service
- Virgin Islands Port Authority
- U.S. Public Health Service, Center for Disease Control
- Virgin Islands Fish and Wildlife Service
- Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture
- Southeastern Wildlife Disease Study

Looking to the Future

Public safety has become a growing concern for wildlife managers. This is particularly true at airports. Increased travel through the Virgin Islands airports, coupled with expanding bird numbers has created a greater need for airport managers to deal with threats posed by wildlife.