

Senator Bill Nelson
Statement for the Environment and Public Works Subcommittee on Water
and Wildlife and Subcommittee on Oversight
“Threats to Native Wildlife Species”
July 8, 2009
406 Dirksen Senate Office Building

Chairman Cardin and Chairman Whitehouse, thank you for inviting me to testify at this hearing today.

Last week tragedy struck in a small town northwest of Orlando, Florida. As the family awoke a scene of horror unfolded.

An eight foot albino Burmese python escaped from its container, slithered through the house and up into a crib where two-year-old Shaiunna Hare lay asleep. The snake bit the child and wrapped itself around her body. By the time the paramedics had arrived, the child was already dead from asphyxiation.

This is truly the scene of a parent’s worst nightmares.

We have been warning about the dangers that these lethal snakes present. I have a ten page document that I will submit for the record detailing python attacks over the last ten years. During that period at least 17 people have been the victim of an attack, of which seven died as a result.

Besides posing a threat to safety, invasive species like the Burmese python are wreaking havoc in our most treasured environments.

Some estimate there are upwards of more than one hundred thousands of these *deadly* pythons in the Everglades National Park.

The crown jewel of our national park system has been transformed into a hunting ground for these predators.

When is the time for action? We already have one tragedy on our hands. How long will it be before one of these snakes gets a hold of the extremely endangered Florida Panther?

How long will it be before a tourist in the Everglades National Park has a dangerous encounter with one of these massive pythons? It took this tragic event to bring back focus to this problem but there is something we can do about it.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has the capability, under law, to declare this an injurious species under the Lacey Act.

After the South Florida Water Management District made a request in June of 2006, Fish and Wildlife has spent the last three years studying it. I think that Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar will take them from studying this issue to acting on it. But there is something else we can do.

Congress can change the law.

I filed a bill in February which amends the Lacey Act and declares pythons as injurious animal.

This will halt the importation and interstate commerce of these deadly snakes.

Classifying the Burmese python or *python molurus bivittatus* as an injurious animal would also stop the importation of these snakes between states.

This is of particular importance – while Burmese pythons have already established a breeding population in South Florida, climate maps from the United States Geological Service indicated roughly a full third of the US is suitable habitat.

The State of Florida has been working from its end to get a handle on these snakes. They now require a yearly registration fee, owners must display knowledge of

handling and care, and snakes are now micro-chipped – so if one got loose you would have a chance to chase them down. It's time for the federal government to step up and address this ecological crisis.

With more than a hundred thousand of these snakes on the loose in the Everglades we must do something before the ecological balance is destroyed. We must change the law and we must do it quickly.

Finally, I would like to thank you again for taking a look at the impact non native plants and animals are having on our nation's natural resources and protected ecosystems. Florida is ground zero for exotic plants and animals. From the Brazilian pepper to Nile monitor lizards, we have seen it all.

I would welcome the opportunity to work with you on reforming the way we allow species from all over the world into the United States. There might be a way to stop the next Burmese python from establishing a foothold here.