



**House
Legislative
Analysis
Section**

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BAN PURPLE LOOSESTRIFE

**House Bill 4774 as introduced
First Analysis (5-17-95)**

**Sponsor: Rep. James Middaugh
Committee: Conservation, Environment,
and Great Lakes**

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

The species *Lythrum virgatum*, or wand loosestrife, is a popular garden perennial. It grows four to eight feet high, with colorful blooms in shades of magenta. However, its cousin, *Lythrum salicaria* (usually referred to as purple loosestrife), is considerably less popular. Although not native to North America, *Lythrum salicaria* has spread rapidly throughout parts of the continent. A background report, "Purple Loosestrife In Michigan: Problems and Controls," issued by the Legislative Service Bureau (LSB) Science and Technology Division in November, 1993, indicates that the plant grows in all of Michigan's southern counties and along the lakeshore of the Lower Peninsula, and in scattered locations in the Upper Peninsula. Moreover, it is expanding across the rest of the state, since, absent the parasites and diseases of its native country, is it very difficult to destroy. According to the LSB background paper, wetland scientists are in agreement that purple loosestrife degrades wetland habitats, because it self-sows with abandon and crowds out native plants such as cattails, rushes, and a native species of loosestrife, *Lythrum alatum*, or winged loosestrife. The plant also clogs agricultural drainage ditches.

The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) uses several methods to control purple loosestrife: manual removal; manipulating water levels in impoundments and other areas; the use of chemical herbicides; and biological control (the use of the plant's natural insect enemies from its native habitat). For example, in July, 1994, the DNR launched its biological control program by releasing beetles in state wildlife areas. It has become apparent, however, that no single method of control can eliminate the plant. Instead, the DNR hopes to simply contain it. However, nurseries and mail order companies continue to sell purple loosestrife plants and seeds. In addition, horticulturalists have "hybridized" *Lythrum salicaria* with wand loosestrife (the garden perennial) and winged loosestrife (the

native wildflower) to produce new varieties. This practice raises the concern that DNR field staff, and others, might not be able to tell the difference between the garden variety of loosestrife and the "nuisance" plant they seek to eradicate. Consequently, legislation has been proposed to regulate the cultivation and trade of *Lythrum salicaria* and of the garden perennial, *Lythrum virgatum*.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

House Bill 4774 would create an act to regulate the planting, cultivation, sale, offering for sale, distribution, and transportation of certain nonnative plants, and to specify penalties for selling purple loosestrife. Under the act, "purple loosestrife" would refer to the species *Lythrum salicaria* and *Lythrum virgatum*, or a hybrid of these species.

Under the bill, it would be a misdemeanor to plant, cultivate, sell, or distribute purple loosestrife, punishable by a fine of up to \$500 and forfeiture of a nursery dealer's certificate for one year, if the person were a nursery dealer, as defined under the Insect Pest and Plant Disease Act. Transporting purple loosestrife within the state would also be misdemeanor, punishable by a fine of up to \$500.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:

According to the House Fiscal Agency, the bill would have no state fiscal impact. (5-10-95)

ARGUMENTS:

For:

Lythrum salicaria, or purple loosestrife, propagates rapidly and reduces the biological diversity of Michigan's wetlands by crowding out native wetland plants. Wetlands furnish feeding and breeding habitat for many fish and wildlife species. However,

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wetlands in which purple loosestrife is a dominant plant harbor fewer desirable species, since they cannot provide the diversity of plant species favored by wildlife. For example, as pointed out in a background report, "Purple Loosestrife In Michigan: Problems and Controls," issued by the Legislative Service Bureau (LSB), large stands of purple loosestrife provide poor nesting habitat for most wetland birds: ducks, herons, and other wetland birds that build platform-type nests cannot use the stiff loosestrife stems as nest material. Further, shallow water habitats are important feeding and breeding areas for frogs, toads, salamanders and fish such as the northern pike. However, large clumps of purple loosestrife in shallow water collect silt and debris, which eventually fill in and obliterate the shallow water habitat.

The problem is not unique to Michigan. The U.S. government has launched pilot biological control projects involving the use of three species of insects -- two beetles and a weevil from Europe -- which feed on purple loosestrife. The insects were released in a number of locations across the country, but not in Michigan, in 1994. Other Midwestern states such as Minnesota, Wisconsin, Ohio and Illinois, have enacted "weed laws" to regulate purple loosestrife's cultivation and trade. The provisions of the bill would allow Michigan to protect its valuable wetlands, and to join other states in controlling purple loosestrife.

POSITIONS:

Representatives of the following testified before the House Conservation, Environment and Great Lakes Committee on May 17, 1995, in support of the bill:

The Department of Natural Resources

The Michigan United Conservation Clubs (MUCC)

The Michigan Natural Areas Council

Representatives of the following submitted written testimony to the committee on May 17, 1995, in support of the bill:

The Michigan Environment Council, an environmental coalition whose members include Clean Water Action, the Michigan Audubon Society, and the Public Interest Research Group in Michigan (PIRGRIM)