

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

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A NEW APPROACH TO INJURIOUS WILDLIFE IMPORTS

The Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has announced new plans for regulating the importation of injurious fish and wildlife species into the United States. A new list of "high risk" species, plus new legislation, make up the new approach.

The introduction of an exotic species may take place accidentally or deliberately. Animals can escape from cages or containers in transit, while being processed through customs checks, while in pet stores or zoos, or while being held by private owners. Many exotic birds are first noted in the vicinity of major airports. Aquatic organisms sometimes escape when holding or breeding ponds flood or leak. Deliberate introductions are often made by persons hoping to establish populations of game species or to provide some control for pest species.

Examples of injurious wildlife species introduced into parts of North America are the walking catfish, African clawed frog, mongoose, Japanese oyster drill, starling, red-whiskered bulbul, monk parakeet, and grass carp; there are many more.

Present regulations that implement a portion of the Lacey Act of 1900 restrict the importation of only a few species of foreign wildlife (mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish, mollusks, and crustaceans). The importation of the overwhelming majority of exotic species does not come under the jurisdiction of the Lacey Act.

The Lacey Act originally was enacted at a time when the movement of wild animals was accomplished by steamships. The availability of most wild, exotic animals was limited and those that were available had to be in good health to withstand the rigors of such transportation. Consequently,

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the number of such animals imported into the United States was small, the cost was high and generally only persons with a real need attempted such operations.

Improvements in techniques for capturing animals, improved access to remote areas, the availability of efficient transportation systems (especially air freight) and an increasing interest in acquiring exotic species have led to a skyrocketing increase in the number of such creatures imported into the United States each year. Modern transportation systems make it possible for an animal to be transported from the wild in their native country to the United States in 48 hours or less--along with any parasites, disease vectors, or other unwelcome hitch-hikers they may harbor.

Director Lynn A. Greenwalt indicates that the Service has received many comments since proposed new regulations were published in 1975. "We are convinced that further modifications are needed to protect native fish and wildlife resources from potentially harmful exotic species introduced from other countries, without unnecessarily affecting those who receive benefit from imported wildlife," he said.

The 1975 proposal would have modified these regulations to include many more species of exotic wildlife considered "high risk" and potentially injurious to native fauna. Entry into the United States would be limited to persons having permits issued on the basis of sound justification. Exotic species considered "low risk" would have less restriction placed on their importation. Due to manpower and budgetary restraints needed to carry out the proposal, however, the final rulemaking was delayed and will not be published.

Therefore the Service proposes to add a few additional "high risk" species to the Lacey Act restrictions without otherwise changing the concept of present regulations. Director Greenwalt believes that new legislation must be enacted to clarify Interior authority to regulate the importation of potentially harmful species of wildlife and to strengthen the Lacey Act. The new legislation should give the Service the authority and flexibility needed to deal effectively and fairly with exotic wildlife importation problems.

This proposal does not involve a complete ban or prohibition on the importation of any species. However, it does attempt to ensure that creatures which pose a threat are imported only by responsible people for justifiable purposes. Animals deemed to be "injurious" may still be imported into the United States under permit issued by the Secretary for scientific, educational, medical, or zoological purposes.

"The legislation under which we are operating is nearly 80 years old," Greenwalt said. "There has been a quantum leap in ecological knowledge in that period, and we need new legislation to protect the United States from unwanted wildlife introductions. There was no way that in 1900 the Congress could foresee the present situation and word the Lacey Act to permit effective control three quarters of a century later."