

Border Health: Who's Guarding the Gate?

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KEYWORDS

• Importation • Trade • Animals • Zoonoses • Disease risk

IMPORTATION OF DOMESTIC AND EXOTIC PETS: CHANGES IN MARKET FORCES

The global trade market, the ease of transporting animals across continents and around the world, lower production costs in foreign countries, and market demand have resulted in a thriving pet trade of exotic animals, birds, and puppies, both pure-bred and small mixed breeds. The flood of animals crossing the United States' borders satisfies the public demand for these pets but is not without risk.

Trade barriers have been disappearing, creating a global marketplace. Improved transportation networks allow travelers, trade goods, and animals to move across continents or the globe in a single day. Improved communication and expanded use of the Internet for commerce simplify the connection between consumers and suppliers worldwide. These changes have created an environment in which a new global pet trade thrives.¹

Between 1986 and 1993, the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade was held. The trade negotiations led to the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1994 and the reduction of tariffs, import limits, and quotas over the next 20 years.² Agricultural product trade was liberalized, and guidelines on the trade of animals and animal products were created by the Office International des Epizooties.³ The WTO operates under the principle that imported products be treated as favorably as domestic goods, but countries are permitted to take measures to protect humans and animals. These changes in trade regulations seem to have expanded the global market. The volume of world trade increased threefold from 1985 through 2000, and the export value of goods from Asia increased fivefold.⁴

Exotic pet ownership is on the rise in the United States, resulting in an increased trade in live animals. The number of United States households owning reptiles

The findings and conclusions in the manuscript are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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Vet Clin Small Anim 39 (2009) 359–372

doi:10.1016/j.cvsm.2008.10.012

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increased from 850,000 in 1991 to 2.7 million in 1998, and from 2001 to 2006 the numbers of pet birds, rodents, fish, turtles, and lizards have risen.⁵ Importers, both legal and illegal, have stepped forward to meet this demand. In the early 1990s, United States imports and exports accounted for 80% of the total world trade of approximately 70 reptile species listed under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).⁶ In the United States, the annual volume of live animal imports has roughly doubled since 1991.¹ There were 183,000 wildlife shipments in 2006, with a declared value of more than \$2.1 billion.⁷ From 2003 through 2006, annual increases in wildlife trade ranged from 6% to 11%. From 2000 through 2004, approximately 588,000 animals were imported into the United States each day.¹

The number of animals being imported illegally is difficult to estimate. Wildlife smuggling is very profitable and is estimated to bring in more than \$6 billion each year.⁸ Interpol estimates that wildlife smuggling ranks third on the contraband list of items of value, behind drugs and firearms.⁸ Customs officers have found animals stuffed in clothing, bags, containers, compartments in cars, and even inside artificial limbs. Animal smuggling is likely to continue until the penalties outweigh the profits.

Starting in 2001, the Los Angeles County Veterinary Public Health and Rabies Control program (VPH-RCP) noticed a sharp increase in puppies being imported from overseas, with an accompanying increase in public interest regarding how to import puppies for resale. Individuals have reported that imported puppies could be sold for much more than their purchase price and shipment costs (VPH-RCP, unpublished data). A kennel in Los Angeles County is selling Yorkshire terrier puppies imported from South Korea for \$1500 to \$4000 each. Puppies smuggled from Mexico often are sold for \$300 to \$1000 cash. Small purebred or crossbred puppies are very popular,⁹ and there is a lack of local breeders to meet the demand. The public's demand for small, cute puppies continues to stimulate the business and increase profits to puppy importers.

CHALLENGES WITH OVERSIGHT AND REGULATION OF TRADE: WHO'S IN CHARGE?

Requirements for importing animals into the United States can be found in the regulations of several federal agencies and reflect the mission of each agency.

In 1900, the Lacey Act became the first federal law protecting wildlife, by prohibiting the interstate movement and importation of wildlife species.¹⁰ Additionally, the Lacey Act prohibits the importation of wildlife that has been determined to be injurious to people, agriculture, horticulture, forestry, or wildlife in the United States.¹ In 1940, the Bureau of Fisheries and the Bureau of Biological Survey was consolidated to create the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in the Department of the Interior,¹¹ with the mission of conserving and protecting wildlife and plants. In 1973, the Endangered Species Act was passed to protect endangered or threatened species.¹⁰ The USFWS also enforces requirements for CITES, an international agreement between governments to ensure that international trade in wild animals and plants does not threaten the existence of those species.¹² Lists of endangered or threatened species covered under CITES can be found in Appendices I, II, and III of the agreement.¹³

USFWS regulations require that all wildlife species imported for commercial, non-commercial, scientific, or personal use be declared at the time of import, be cleared by the USFWS, and enter the United States through a designated port. In most cases, the importer must have a USFWS permit.^{14,15} If the species is covered under CITES, the shipment also must be accompanied by a current CITES certificate.¹²

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