



SULCATA STATION

Interstate Shipping Regulations for African Tortoises within the USA

SUMMARY

In 2000, the U.S. government enacted regulations that **MUST** be followed before any African tortoises (including sulcata) can legally be shipped across state lines within the United States. These regulations were passed to prevent the spread of a tropical disease (*Heartwater Disease*) that can infect cattle, sheep, deer, and other ungulates. The disease entered the United States via African Bont Ticks on some wild-caught tortoises that were imported from Africa into the United States. **So far as we know, these regulations are STILL in effect and have not been repealed, as of 2009.**

Background Information

In 2000, federal inspectors found African Bont Ticks at a reptile import facility in Florida. This facility had recently imported several wild-caught sulcata specimens from West Africa. Bont Ticks can carry *Heartwater Disease*, an illness which can spread to domestic and wild ruminant animals such as cattle, sheep, goats, deer, etc. At the urging of the U.S. cattle industry, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) initially prohibited all interstate transport of African tortoises kept as pets or zoo animals within the United States.

After seeking input from the reptile hobbyist and rescue communities, the USDA then enacted a regulation that 1) prohibits the importation of certain African tortoise species, and 2) sets procedures for interstate shipment of African tortoises already within the United States.

Official News Release from the USDA

USDA Allows Interstate Movement of Certain Land Tortoises with Certification

WASHINGTON, July 20, 2000 --The U.S. Department of Agriculture has lifted a prohibition on the interstate movement of certain land tortoises.

USDA will now allow the interstate movement of the leopard tortoise (*Geochelone pardalis*), the African spurred tortoise (*Geochelone sulcata*), and Bell's hingeback tortoise (*Kinixys belliana*) if they are accompanied by a health certificate signed by a federal or accredited veterinarian stating that the tortoises have been examined by that veterinarian and found free of ticks.

"This action will enable owners and breeders to seek buyers, adopters, and health care for these tortoises throughout the United States," said Alfonso Torres, deputy administrator for veterinary services with the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), a part of USDA's marketing and regulatory programs mission area. "The health certification ensures that the interstate movement of these tortoises won't result in the spread of exotic ticks."

Each health certificate will cost \$16 to \$25 and help guarantee the acceptability of these animals in international markets. The goal of the certification, however, is to prevent the spread of exotic ticks known to be vectors of Heartwater Disease.

SULCATA STATION

Page Title: Interstate shipping regulations for African tortoises

Page Location: www.sulcata-station.org/pdf/shipping.pdf

Page 2 of 3

Heartwater Disease is an acute, infectious disease of ruminants, including cattle, sheep, goats, white-tailed deer, and antelope. This disease has a 60 percent or greater mortality rate in livestock and a 90 percent or greater mortality rate in white-tailed deer.

PLEASE NOTE: The prohibition on the importation of these tortoises [from other countries] remains in place.

For more information, contact David Wilson, senior staff entomologist, emergency programs, VS, APHIS, 4700 River Road, Unit 41, Riverdale, Md. 20737, (301) 734-8073.

Notice of this action is scheduled to appear in the July 21 Federal Register and became effective July 17, 2000.

**Title of this Action: DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS)
9 CFR Part 74
Docket No. 00-016-3
Importation and Interstate Movement of Certain Land Tortoises**

More Information from the Forums

When the USDA initially banned interstate transport, internet forums for tortoise and turtle keepers disseminated information to quell panic and explain the issue to worried tortoise owners. Darrell Senneke of the World Chelonian Trust provided this information via cross-posts to many of the tortoise forums on the Internet:

Posted to: Tortoise Trust List
Date: Tue, 28 Mar 2000 10:12:38
From: Darrell Senneke
Subject: RE: Heartwater Disease

Cross-posting this reply for information exchange purposes - please feel free to forward on as needed.

This is a very important distinction: The vector for the disease is the tick. The tortoises themselves DO NOT harbor this disease. The ticks are the problem -- no ticks = no worries. In this case the tick would need to be carrying the disease by biting an infected cow or the like -- then it would have to find its way to a tortoise and then back to another cow.

Heartwater is an acute tick-borne disease of domestic and wild ruminants, including cattle, sheep, goats, deer, and antelope. This lethal disease is caused by the rickettsial bacterium *Cowdria ruminantium*, an intracellular organism found in the endothelial cells of brain capillaries, and it is transmitted by ticks of the genus *Amblyomma*. It has recently been shown that *C. ruminantium* infection can also be transmitted vertically from infected cows to their calves.

A typical case of acute Heartwater, as seen in susceptible ruminants, would exhibit clinical signs within 2-3 weeks of tick attachment. The first evidence of clinical disease would be a rapid rise in body temperature, loss of appetite and respiratory distress, followed by nervous signs such as circling motions, incoordination, recumbency, and paddling movements of the limbs. Mortality rates in susceptible species would be expected to be from 40% to approaching 100%. On post-mortem examination, the most constant feature is accumulation of fluid in various organs and cavities, resulting in pulmonary edema, hydropericardium, hydrothorax and ascites.

SULCATA STATION

Page Title: Interstate shipping regulations for African tortoises

Page Location: www.sulcata-station.org/pdf/shipping.pdf

Page 3 of 3

Diagnosis of Heartwater in the field has relied for 50 years on the demonstration of *C. ruminantium* organisms in Giemsa-stained brain smears. However, the recent development of DNA probes and PCR assays has provided more sensitive tests for the diagnosis of *C. ruminantium* infection in both ticks and ruminants. Unfortunately, there is no adequate serodiagnostic test available at the present time due to serological cross-reactions with closely related *Ehrlichia* species. There is no effective treatment for Heartwater once clinical disease is evident. Also, no practical vaccine is currently available commercially to protect against the disease, although promising results have recently been attained in the development of inactivated vaccines and a recombinant DNA vaccine. Prevention of Heartwater, therefore, relies on control of its tick vectors at this time.

I repeat - the tortoises are NOT infected; they are only involved with tick transport.

MORE INFO:

<http://www.geocities.com/HotSprings/Oasis/6455/heartwater-links.html>

It is my firm belief that a system could be put in place to certify tortoises "tick free" - especially Captive-Bred (CB) animals by veterinary examination.

Darrell Senneke

What to do if you are transporting a sulcata tortoise across state lines within the United States

As it is currently written, the federal regulation does NOT distinguish between captive-bred tortoises that have never left the United States and the wild-caught imported tortoises that were likely to harbor the African Bont Tick.

Because of this, we recommend that you obey the federal regulation -- not only because of the possible health consequences to native wildlife -- but to avoid having your tortoise confiscated if you happen to encounter a USDA inspector who is familiar with this regulation.

If you plan to travel with your tortoise, or if you plan to ship it to an adoptive owner in another state, you should follow these procedures:

1. At least one week before your travel/shipping date, have an accredited veterinarian examine the tortoise. The vet should provide a basic checkup and visually examine the tortoise closely for ticks.
2. If no ticks are found on the tortoise, the veterinarian should sign a Certificate of Veterinary Inspection or similar certificate (the vet's office should have these on hand) stating that the tortoise is tick-free. You will have to pay for the office visit and the inspection certificate.
3. Make sure a copy of the Certificate accompanies the tortoise at all times. Tape it to the shipping container, or make sure it is kept on hand by the person transporting the tortoise.