



SULCATA STATION

Interstate Shipping Regulations for African Tortoises within the USA

SUMMARY

If you are going to move from one state to another within the United States and you want to take your tortoise pet(s) along with you, do your research beforehand! There are federal regulations that should be followed, and many states have enacted their own specific laws that may prevent you from shipping or moving your sulcata tortoise across state lines.

In 2000, the U.S. government enacted regulations that **MUST** be followed to legally ship any African tortoise (including sulcata) across state lines within the United States. PLEASE NOTE that as far as we know, these regulations are **STILL** in effect as of 2010. **If you plan to move across state lines with your tortoise, please read and follow the information given in the section below entitled “What to do if you are transporting a sulcata tortoise across state lines within the United States.”**

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In 2000, federal inspectors from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) 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 USDA initially banned all interstate transport of African tortoises kept as pets or zoo animals within the United States.

After the reptile hobbyist and rescue communities pointed out that most African tortoises in the United States were captive-bred, and that the shipping ban would negatively affect rescue organizations, the USDA then enacted a regulation that 1) banned the importation of certain African tortoise species, and 2) allowed interstate transport of African tortoises already within the United States if the tortoises were inspected by a veterinarian and certified to be tick-free.

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.”

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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.

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 of African tortoises, experienced turtle and tortoise keepers used internet forums to explain the situation to worried new 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.

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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.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE TRANSPORTING A SULCATA TORTOISE ACROSS STATE LINES WITHIN THE UNITED STATES

As 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 carried exotic ticks into the U.S. 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 a tortoise 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.

STATE REGULATIONS

Most states have their own regulations on import and ownership of exotic pets. Some states have an outright ban on owning certain types of exotic pets, while others may ban ownership of local species that are threatened or endangered.

Unfortunately, there is no single source or website that lists all of the states' rules about exotic pets. You may have to do a bit of searching on the internet or call various agencies to find out what rules apply in whatever state you're relocating to. Generally, these laws are administered by the state's Department of Wildlife, Dept. of Natural Resources, Dept. of Game and Fish, or the equivalent. In some cases, you may even need to check with the state's Health Department!

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In New Mexico (where Sulcata Station is based), the Dept. of Game & Fish enacted an Importation Rule prohibiting the general public from bringing sulcata tortoises into the state. Sulcata tortoises are included on the international CITES I list as an endangered species, which places them into Group IV of the NM Species Importation list. New Mexico's regulation now states:

Species Importation List Group IV is for live non-domesticated animals that are considered dangerous, invasive, undesirable, state or federal listed threatened, endangered, C.I.T.E.S. appendix 1 or a furbearer. **The importation of these species are prohibited for the general public** but may be allowed for, scientific study, department approved restoration and recovery plans, zoological display, temporary events/entertainment, use as service animal or by a qualified expert.