Lethal Disease Found in Ticks on Reptiles in Florida

Subject: Lethal Disease Found in Ticks on Reptiles in Florida
Date: Tue, 4 Jan 2000 08:52:16 -1000
From: Fred Kraus <fkraus@hawaii.edu>
To: biisc-l@hawaii.edu

ISC folks,
For your information a more detailed follow-up of a news item I passed around earlier.
Fred Kraus

> Lethal Disease Found in Ticks on Reptiles in Florida
> ____________________________________________________________
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> 1) Summary/Introduction
> 2) Text of Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Emergency Prohibition
> Against Importation of Certain African Tortoises
> 3) Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services: Division of Animal
> Industry -- Heartwater Disease -- Specific Reasons for Finding an Immediate
> Danger to the Public Health, Safety and Welfare
> 4) Text of Memo To: Reptile Dealers, Importers, Pet Shops, and Interested
> Persons
>> From the Division of Law Enforcement on the Prohibition on Importation of
> Certain African Tortoises
> ____________________________________________________________
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> 1) Injurious Wildlife and State Import Ban in Florida
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> As of 12/21/99 there is an emergency State rulemaking banning the
importation
into the State of Florida of any African spurred tortoises (Geochelone
sulcata) or leopard tortoises (Geochelone pardalis). The emergency ban is
due to the recent
finding that some of these reptiles are infected with "tropical bont ticks"
carrying the rickettsial bacterium (Cowdria ruminantium) and may transmit
the Heartwater Disease. Heartwater is an acute tick-borne disease of
domestic and wild ruminants, including cattle, sheep, goats, deer and
antelope. Florida estimates that should this disease enter the U.S.,
mortality rates in susceptible species could be expected to range from 40
to 100%.
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> On November 29, 1999, ticks collected from imported tortoises in a
Hillsborough County, Florida reptile facility tested positive for the
disease. The facility is under quarantine, eradication procedures are under
way and it is hoped that no wildlife or domestic animals have been infected.
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> Effective December 17, 1999, Florida passed an emergency rule prohibiting
the importation or transportation into the State of any African spurred
turtle or leopard tortoise. On December 9, 1999, the Florida Department
of Agriculture and Consumer Services also passed an emergency rule
targeting Heartwater Disease transmission by restricting the importation
into the State of all wildlife without an Official Certificate of
Veterinary Inspection showing the animals to be free of disease and vectors
of infectious disease.
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> Anyone with questions or seeking documentation about the tortoise
prohibition
> by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation commission may call
> (850)488-6253 and questions about the need for Veterinary Certificates may
> be directed to the Division of Animal Industry, Bureau of Disease Control
> at (850)488-7182.
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2) FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION

RULE TITLE: Emergency Prohibition Against Importation of Certain African Tortoises
RULE NUMBER: 68A-ER-99-01

SPECIFIC REASONS FOR FINDING AN IMMEDIATE DANGER TO THE PUBLIC HEALTH,
SAFETY, AND WELFARE: Heartwater is an acute tick-borne disease of domestic and wild ruminants including cattle, sheep, goats and deer. This disease is caused by the rickettsial bacterium Cowdria ruminantium which is transmitted by the ticks of the genus Amblyomma. Animals or wildlife that contact this disease have a mortality rate of between 40-100%. There is no officially recognized treatment or vaccine for the disease other than to control the introduction of the tick vectors. The Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (DACS) recently notified the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWCC) that 15 Amblyomma sparsum ticks collected from tortoises in Hillsborough County have tested positive for Cowdria ruminantium (Heartwater organism). Also, since 1997, nine reptile facilities in Florida have been found to have ticks capable of carrying Heartwater disease. The ticks primarily infect two African tortoises of the genus Geochelone, the African spurred tortoise (Geochelone sulcata) and the leopard tortoise (Geochelone pardalis).

The Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (DASC) has also filed an emergency rule to deal with animals imported from countries where Heartwater disease is endemic and the FWCC emergency rule will parallel DACS efforts to control introduction of this disease though importation of tick-infected wildlife. The DACS rule asserts that "The introduction of the disease into Florida would be disastrous to the state's beef and cattle industry and the state's ruminant wildlife."

Therefore, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, vested by Article IV, Section 9, Florida Constitution, with the state's executive and regulatory authority over wildlife, finds that there is an immediate danger to the public welfare if immediate action is not taken to prohibit the importation of the African spurred tortoise (Geochelone sulcata) and the leopard tortoise (Geochelone pardalis). The Commission also finds that this limited action is the best means to address the emergency and is in the best interests of the citizens of the State of Florida. It is the intent of the Commission to begin regular rulemaking to adopt permanent rules addressing this problem.

REASONS FOR CONCLUDING THAT THE PROCEDURE USED IS FAIR UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES: The FWCC discussed this action at their regular meeting in Islamorada, Florida on December 9, 1999 and, at that public meeting, made the requisite findings of an emergency and that the rule procedure was fair. Given the need to act immediately to avert an infection of the state's livestock and infection of other ruminants, this rule is fair. The entire text of this emergency rule is to be published in the Florida Administrative Weekly and distributed to the Joint Administrative Procedures Committee of the Florida Legislature as required by Section 120.54(4), Florida Statutes. Notice of this action of the FWCC is being distributed to about 2,000 persons and organizations, including major state newspapers and electronic media, on the Commission's mailing list. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission hereby finds that the procedures used to promulgate this emergency rule are fair under the circumstances.

SUMMARY OF THE RULE: This emergency rule will prohibit the importation into Florida two species of African tortoises, the African spurred tortoise (Geochelone sulcata) and the leopard tortoise (Geochelone pardalis).

THE FULL TEXT OF THE EMERGENCY RULE IS:


(1) No African spurred tortoise (Geochelone sulcata) or leopard tortoise (Geochelone pardalis) shall be imported or transported into the state.

Specific Authority Art. IV, Sec. 9, Fla. Const. Law Implemented Art. IV, Sec. 9, Fla. Const. s. 120.54(4), F.S.

EFFECTIVE DATE: December 17, 1999

3) EMERGENCY RULE

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND CONSUMER SERVICES
Division of Animal Industry

RULE TITLE: RULE NUMBER:
Heartwater Disease 5C-ER-99-1

SPECIFIC REASONS FOR FINDING AN IMMEDIATE DANGER TO THE PUBLIC HEALTH, SAFETY AND WELFARE: Heartwater is an acute tick-borne disease of domestic and wild ruminants, including cattle, sheep, goats, deer and antelope. This killer disease is caused by the rickettsial bacterium Cowdria ruminantium which is transmitted by ticks of the genus Amblyomma. It is characterized by 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. Should this disease enter the United States, mortality rates in susceptible species would be expected to be from 40% to approaching 100%. Since there is no officially recognized treatment or practical vaccine to protect against the disease, prevention relies on control of its tick vectors. The same ticks are also potential vectors of diseases which may affect the general public.

The justification for this action is the November 29, 1999 notification that 15 Amblyomma sparsum ticks collected from tortoises in Hillsborough County have tested positive for Cowdria ruminantium (Heartwater) organism.

Reptiles, amphibians, llamas, antelopes, and captive wild species from all areas are included in this rule because they are potential carriers of heartwater or ticks which are competent vectors of heartwater. Introduction of the disease into Florida would be disastrous to the State's beef and dairy cattle industries and the State's ruminant wildlife.

REASONS FOR CONCLUDING THAT THE PROCEDURE USED IS FAIR UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES: Under this action requiring certification of non-exposure to the disease is justified until the Department has determined that a threat to cattle, deer and other ruminant animals in the state no longer exists. This action is fair because without this restriction, the state's multimillion dollar cattle industry and deer population is endangered.

SUMMARY OF THE RULE: This rules places restrictions upon the importation of certain animals capable of carrying heartwater disease, or the vector of heartwater disease, into the state.

THE PERSON TO BE CONTACTED REGARDING THE EMERGENCY RULE IS: Dr. Leroy M. Coffman, Director, Division of Animal Industry, Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, 407 South Calhoun Street, Room 335, Mayo Building, Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0800. Phone 850/410-0900.

THE FULL TEXT OF THE EMERGENCY RULE IS:

5C-ER-99-1 - Temporary Restrictions on Importation of Animals

(1) The Official Certificate of Veterinary Inspection (OCVI) for reptiles, amphibians, llamas, antelopes, and captive wild species entering the state must contain a statement by the issuing veterinarian that the animals identified on the OCVI are free of signs of infectious or
communicable disease and the vectors of any infectious or communicable disease.

(2) Animals from countries where heartwater is endemic.

(a) All animals imported from countries where heartwater is endemic must have a prior permission number recorded on the accompanying OCVI. This number can be obtained from the Division by telephone.

(b) All animals intended for importation into or through the State of Florida from countries where heartwater is endemic shall be accompanied by an OCVI issued in accordance with this rule, and showing that the veterinarian issuing the OCVI inspected the animals at the time of movement to the port of entry and found them free from ticks and any evidence of communicable disease and that, as far as it has been possible to determine, they have not been exposed to heartwater, or the vectors of heartwater, during the 60 days immediately preceding their movement to the port of entry.

(c) All animals offered for entry into or through the State of Florida from countries where heartwater is endemic shall be subject to inspection at the port of entry, and all such animals found to be free from communicable disease and tick infestation and not to have been exposed thereto, shall be admitted into the United States subject to the other applicable provisions of this rule. Animals found to be infected with or have been exposed to a communicable disease, or infested with ticks, shall be refused entry. Animals refused entry shall be quarantined until such time that they have been inspected, treated and deemed to be free from communicable disease and tick infestation.

Specific Authority: 570.07(21) and (23), 585.08(2)(a) F.S. Law Implemented: 585.08(1), 585.145 F.S. History: New.

THIS RULE TAKES EFFECT IMMEDIATELY UPON BEING FILED WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE.

EFFECTIVE DATE: December 9, 1999.

MEMORANDUM

TO: REPTILE DEALERS, IMPORTERS, PET SHOPS, AND INTERESTED PERSONS

FROM: COLONEL ROBERT L. EDWARDS

DIRECTOR, DIVISION OF LAW ENFORCEMENT

SUBJECT: PROHIBITION ON IMPORTATION OF CERTAIN AFRICAN TORTOISES

In 1997, it was determined by University of Florida researchers that certain African species of wildlife were being imported into this state infected with "tropical bont ticks" that could carry the Heartwater Disease. Heartwater is an acute tick-borne disease of domestic and wild ruminants, including cattle, sheep, goats, deer, and antelope. This killer disease is caused by the rickettsial bacterium Cowdria ruminantium, which is transmitted by ticks of the genus Amblyomma. Should this disease enter the United States, mortality rates in susceptible species would be expected to be from 40 to 100 percent. There is no officially recognized treatment or vaccine to protect against the disease; therefore, if infected ticks
were to spread to domestics or deer, it could spark an economic and wildlife disaster of epic proportions.

Commission Wildlife Inspectors and Livestock Inspectors for the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services began collecting ticks from suspected reptile and mammal hosts in 1997. Since that time over 500 ticks capable of transmitting Heartwater have been found. Nine reptile facilities were found to have a total of 119 infected reptiles. However, none tested positive for the Cowdria ruminantium (Heartwater) organism until November 29, 1999. On this date, 15 Amblyomma sparsum ticks collected from tortoises in a Hillsborough County reptile facility tested positive for the disease. These ticks were found on leopard tortoises. The facility is now under quarantine and procedures are underway to eradicate all ticks in the area. We are hopeful that no wildlife nor domestics have been infected.

PROHIBITION ON IMPORTATION OF CERTAIN AFRICAN TORTOISES

December 21, 1999

According to University researchers, the majority of the Amblyomma ticks capable of transmitting Heartwater collected, since 1997, were found on two species of African tortoises: the African spurred tortoise (Geochelone sulcata) and the leopard tortoise (Geochelone pardalis). Therefore, to protect Florida's wildlife and domestic livestock against this dreaded disease, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission passed an emergency rule prohibiting the importation or transportation into the state of any African spurred tortoise or leopard tortoise.

This prohibition went into effect on December 17, 1999. We are requesting your cooperation by immediately canceling any outstanding orders you may have for shipments of these species. Our Wildlife Inspectors will be monitoring wildlife imports coming into the state and will seize any shipments of these species. They will be returned to the shipping point at the vendor's expense. In addition, it is prohibited to accept domestic shipments of such tortoises into Florida.

Commission Officers will take appropriate legal action against anyone importing African spurred or leopard tortoises subsequent to this notice. It is imperative that anyone possessing these tortoises maintain their paperwork showing when they were received and their shipping origin. Such records shall be displayed upon request from any Commission Officer.

Currently, researchers are developing a safe treatment for removal of external parasites from the tortoises. When this treatment is tested and proven effective, you will be notified. It is imperative that all African spurred and leopard tortoises within Florida be treated for removal of ticks, as well as treatment of those reptiles which have been kept in proximity to African spurred or leopard tortoises. Other reptiles, such as pythons, have been found infected with the Amblyomma tick kept in reptile stocks maintained in commercial entities and private collections.

On December 9, 1999, the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services also passed an emergency rule regarding Heartwater. Their rule restricts the importation of all wildlife without an Official Certificate of Veterinary Inspection showing the animals to be free of disease and vectors of infectious disease. Please contact the Division of Animal Industry, Bureau of Disease Control, at (850) 488-7182 for additional details.

Again, thank you in advance for your cooperation and if we may answer any questions concerning the tortoise prohibition please call the Bureau of Support Services, (850) 488-6253.