

Wildlife Services

Protecting People
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Factsheet

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Relocating Wildlife Requires Caution



Wildlife Services (WS), a program within the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) provides Federal leadership and expertise to resolve wildlife damage that threatens the Nation's agricultural and natural resources, human health and safety, and property.

An important part of WS' mission includes assisting State and Federal agencies with the relocation of wild animals and reducing damage caused by accidentally or illegally relocated animals. These efforts include conducting wildlife disease surveillance and monitoring activities.

Relocating Wildlife Requires Caution

Relocation, sometimes referred to as translocation or transplantation, is the capture and transfer of a wild animal from one area to another. Relocation has been used to enhance or reintroduce populations of rare or locally extinct wildlife, provide hunting or wildlife viewing opportunities, and reduce local human-wildlife conflicts. Thousands of individual animals are intentionally moved across the United States each year. WS assists wildlife resource management agencies with relocation efforts where practical and permissible.

Although poorly documented, a substantial number of animals are also unintentionally relocated in trucks, trains, and boats associated with interstate movement of garbage or other commodities. WS helps reduce and manage damage to agriculture, natural resources, or property caused by the accidental translocation of wild animals.

Unplanned relocation can have devastating impacts. The brown tree snake, accidentally introduced to Guam in the mid-1900s, has caused—among other damage—the near extinction of most of Guam's native forest birds and reptiles. Millions of dollars are being spent to manage populations and prevent the snake's spread to other islands. Zebra and quagga mussels, introduced to American waters in the 1980s, cause damage to infrastructure and native wildlife. Their range can unintentionally expand as boats are moved from one waterway to another.

Owners of exotic pets sometimes cannot manage their charges and release them into the wild. WS was asked to eradicate a growing population of the giant African (Gambian) pouch rat on a Florida key, because the 10-15 pound rodent posed a risk to becoming an agricultural pest. Other released invasive species representing environmental hazards include: pythons, iguana, nutria, and European starlings.

A WS canine team inspects cargo to prevent the unintentional spread of the brown tree snake from Guam.



The relocation of wild animals can hinder efforts to contain or eliminate wildlife diseases such as chronic wasting disease, bovine tuberculosis, and rabies. Experts believe that in the 1970s, hunters relocated rabies-infected raccoons from Florida to the Mid-Atlantic States, thus expanding the range of that disease. The cost of living with rabies in the United States exceeds \$300 million per year. WS established the National Rabies Management Program to prevent the further spread of rabies and eventually to eliminate this disease in the United States. Through the National Wildlife Disease Program, WS seeks the early detection, prevention, and control of wildlife-borne diseases, including those that can harm human health and agriculture.

Another example of the possible negative impact of relocation was seen in 2007 when State and Federal officials confiscated red fox and coyote being illegally relocated from the Midwest to the Southeast United States. Although the animals were negative for rabies, they tested positive for canine distemper, six different viruses, and 23 species of parasites. Canine distemper—contagious, incurable, and often fatal—affects the respiratory, gastrointestinal, and central nervous systems of dogs and many carnivores.

Feral swine, often called wild hogs or pigs, are a nonnative species that represents a devastating threat to native wildlife, ecosystems, and agriculture. They are both environmentally destructive and carry diseases that affect people, domestic pets, and livestock, causing at least \$1 billion in damage each year. In 1988, feral swine were found in 16 States; today,



they are in at least 35 States, in part due to illegal relocation for recreational hunting. Relocating feral swine without negative blood tests for certain diseases is against the law.

In recent years, various nongovernmental organizations and associations have recognized the potential negative impact translocation can have on disease management. They support the adoption and enforcement of more aggressive State and Federal regulations prohibiting importation, distribution, and relocation of some wildlife species, including bats.

Beneficial Relocation

Wildlife can be trapped and relocated for the purpose of reintroducing a wildlife species in areas where they are locally extinct. To prevent the spread of disease, a thorough examination and disease screening is an important precautionary step prior to moving wildlife.

WS has assisted in the careful, supervised relocation of gray wolves and big horn sheep, among other species. At airports, WS also occasionally relocates raptors with permission of other agencies that manage bird species.

Since the 1970s, 18 States have been reintroducing river otters successfully. From 2008 to 2010, WS worked cooperatively with several organizations to reintroduce more than 30 healthy river otters to New Mexico's Rio Pueblo De Taos Indian Reservation from Washington, where they were encountering conflicts with people. Prior to transport, the river otters were carefully examined to ensure they were healthy and free of disease. APHIS' Veterinary Services staff performed the examinations, including blood tests, screening for diseases, and a 7-day quarantine to observe for signs of disease or illness.

Concerns about Relocation of Wildlife

Whether animals are moved unintentionally or on purpose, significant unintended negative consequences can occur when the public, nuisance wildlife control operators, rehabilitators, or others move

Each year, invasive feral swine, or wild hogs, cause more than \$1 billion in property damage—like the agricultural loss shown in this corn field.

wildlife. Individuals sometimes transport and release rehabilitated sick or injured wildlife. Relocation of nuisance wildlife is often suggested rather than lethal removal. Although this seems humane, it may pose a threat to the animals themselves or may expand the areas in which nuisance damage occurs.



USDA–APHIS Veterinary Services conducted examinations to ensure the health of river otters relocated by WS from Washington to New Mexico.

Research has shown that animals released in a new area may face aggressive competition from existing animals in the area. Some species, such as white-tailed deer, may be so stressed by capture that they become physically ill after release and some die. Finding available, suitable habitat may be extremely difficult for species that already have high population numbers, such as beaver, raccoon, and Canada geese.

Wildlife managers recognize relocation is often a complex issue. Key concerns associated with the relocation of nuisance mammals include:

- Stress and mortality for the animals being moved;
- Lack of suitable release sites;

- Impacts on resident animals at release sites;
- Disease spread to other wildlife, livestock, companion animals, and people;
- Impacts on the National Rabies Management Program and other disease management initiatives; and
- Relocated wildlife can return and continue to cause conflicts or can create a new problem in another location.

For guidance on resolving a wildlife problem, rather than relocating wildlife, contact your State's wildlife management agency or USDA–WS program at 1–866–4–USDA–WS (1–866–487–3297). WS personnel can provide advice on legal and practical methods for managing wildlife damage.

Please remember:

- Movement of wildlife can cause competition for food and habitat between the resident population and the newly introduced animal.
- Moving certain wildlife is against the law in many States.
- Relocation can spread diseases, such as distemper and rabies, to new areas.
- Some species can be highly destructive if introduced into inappropriate areas.
- State or Federal laws may prohibit or restrict relocation within or out of a State.



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