

CODES OF PRACTICE FOR THE USE AND DISPOSAL OF IMPORTED AQUATIC ANIMAL PRODUCTS

Background

In June 1995, the Minister for Primary Industries and Energy announced the formation of the National Task Force on Imported Fish and Fish Products (the Task Force), to examine and report on the importation of fish and fish products. The Task Force released its report in December 1996.

In responding to the Task Force's recommendations, the Government tasked AQIS to review existing quarantine policies for the importation of aquatic animals and their products. As part of this review, AQIS is conducting import risk analyses (IRAs) on many aquatic animals and their products to ensure that quarantine requirements are consistent with current scientific knowledge and Australia's international obligations as a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO). AQIS is also involved in "AQUAPLAN: Australia's National Strategic Plan for Aquatic Animal Health 1998–2003". This is a major initiative to enhance Australia's aquatic animal health infrastructure and is being coordinated by the National Office for Animal and Plant Health.

One of the Task Force recommendations was that the AQIS should facilitate the development of Codes of Practice on the post import handling of aquatic animals and their products. The Government accepted this recommendation and AQIS has prepared this discussion paper as the first step in its response.

Why have a Code of Practice for aquatic animal imports?

Australian quarantine policies and practices are among the most strict and conservative in the world. No quarantine system can however completely remove the risk that unwanted diseases may be introduced as a consequence of the international movement of animals (including fish) and their products. AQIS imposes quarantine measures offshore prior to export, at the Australian border and after importation to reduce quarantine risk to a very low level. Quarantine policies and practices are constantly being re-evaluated to ensure that they are as effective as possible in light of advances in scientific knowledge on the pests and diseases that are exotic to Australia.

Nevertheless, aquatic animals or aquatic animal products may be infected with a disease organism without showing obvious signs of disease and may consequently pass quarantine. Should infected aquatic animals, aquatic animal product or associated materials such as transport water be released into waterways, it is possible for serious disease to spread to farmed and wild aquatic animals and become established in Australia.

Members of industries and the general community that use imported aquatic animals and associated products can help keep unwanted diseases out of Australia in many ways. This begins with compliance to quarantine regulations, and is supported by proper handling and disposal of imported aquatic animals and associated products. Although this is not specifically

covered by quarantine regulations (once imported goods 'clear' quarantine, AQIS normally has no further legislative control), proper post import handling practices can be very important in keeping unwanted pests and diseases out of Australia.

The incorporation of good health management practices into Codes of Practice for industries and groups that use imported aquatic animals and associated products is consequently an important means to reduce any residual disease risks. Such Codes of Practice also have the benefit that they help promote a responsible public image for the group or industry.

A number of groups such as the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (PIJAC), Recfish Australia and the Australian Prawn Farmers' Association (APFA) have already made substantial progress in promoting the adoption of their own general Codes of Practice. AQIS acknowledges and commends these efforts, and hopes that by incorporating health issues into these and other Codes of Practice, awareness of the disease risks that may be associated with the use and disposal of imported aquatic animals and their products will be raised, and the widespread acceptance and implementation of practices that minimise these risks will be promoted.

What is a Code of Practice?

A Code of Practice is a statement of an industry's or group's commitment to conduct its activities or business in accordance with specified 'good practice' principles. The Code of Practice may prescribe standards (eg all newly introduced ornamental fish will be kept separate from resident stocks for set period of time), or it may contain general statements of intent (eg only healthy fish will be provided to retail outlets, or disease outbreaks will be reported promptly to the responsible authority), or it may combine these two approaches. If the Code of Practice is very detailed and/or prescriptive, the practical arrangements for meeting the objectives may be set out in a manual or handbook, copies of which are held by all participating members of the industry or group concerned.

Compliance with a Code of Practice is a voluntary undertaking by the members of the industry or group. Compliance is not a legal requirement and enforcement or 'policing' of such a Code and penalties for non-compliance (eg loss of accredited status) are for the industry or group concerned to decide. How compliance issues are dealt with will affect the credibility of the industry/group that developed the code.

Accordingly, it is important that the individual members of the industry or group agree on the need for a Code, and that the Code is developed through a process of meaningful consultation with all members. The Code must be set out in practical and straightforward terms to encourage operators to implement it on a consistent, long-term basis.

Governments and regulatory agencies are not usually involved in developing and implementing Codes of Practice, however such agencies can help by providing advice (eg by identifying how the requirements of a Code of Practice would align and support compliance with relevant regulatory requirements).

Regulatory agencies may also ‘recognise’ operators who comply with a Code of Practice. For example, such operators may be inspected or audited less frequently than those who do not adopt the Code, though this does not alter the operator’s obligation to comply with relevant legal requirements. From a regulatory perspective, the major benefit of an industry taking up a Code of Practice is that it encourages the adoption of sound policies and practices without introducing new layers of legislation, bureaucracy and cost.

Objectives of a Code of Practice

For the purpose of this discussion paper, Codes of Practice should have the following broad objectives:

- *to protect aquatic animals and the environment from the entry, establishment and spread of unwanted pests and diseases;*
- *to promote compliance with relevant laws and requirements of Australian Federal, State and local governments;*
- *to improve the efficiency and sustainability of relevant industries; and*
- *to meet public expectations regarding the protection of animal health and the environment.*

Additional, more specific objectives may be included as appropriate to particular industries or community groups.

Key elements of a Code of Practice

A Code of Practice must be based on practical strategies that can be adopted in a flexible and cost effective manner, having regard to local arrangements. The strategies should encourage the uptake of new, more efficient technologies and ‘best practice’ approaches.

Key elements of a Code of Practice may include any or all of the following:

- entry of imported aquatic animals and associated products into waterways;
avoid the entry of unwanted aquatic animals or associated products into waterways – use commercial systems for the disposal of waste; if products must be placed into water, use locally sourced products or products from a known safe source.
- disposal of packaging materials and water used for the transport of imported animals/products;
dispose of packaging via municipal or commercial systems for the disposal of solid and liquid waste; if the packaging is reusable, make sure it is effective and safely cleaned before reuse.

- disposal of carcasses, offal and other animal wastes
make sure that carcasses, offal and wastes are treated and/or disposed of appropriately, particularly any that are affected by disease. Dispose of by deep burial (at a suitable site), incineration or use of municipal or commercial systems for disposal of solid wastes. If waste materials are buried, prevent access by scavengers such as seagulls by promptly covering it.
- use of baits by recreational fishers and the commercial industry;
use locally sourced bait; consider use of bait not sourced from aquatic animals; use baits that have been processed to reduce the risks of spreading disease; do not release live bait animals or unused bait into waterways when finished.
- use of imported animals and products in the aquatic environment;
minimise the use of imported products and animals; obtain imported products from sources with a good health status; the use of processed imported products is preferential to the use of live or fresh imported product.

Examples of Codes of Practice

Several aquatic animal-based industries are developing or have implemented Codes of Practice, which include issues such as the prevention of entry and establishment of aquatic animal pests and diseases. The PIJAC Code of Practice for Aquarium Operations recommends against the sale or the release into natural waterways of aquatic animals suffering from disease. Recfish Australia and the Australian Prawn Farmers Association also have in place Codes of Practice which consider some disease issues.

Further action

AQIS encourages industry and other groups to develop Codes of Practice that address aquatic animal health and the use and disposal of imported aquatic animals and products. For further information please contact:

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What you can do

You can participate by:

- joining an existing group or organisation or forming your own;
- discussing within your industry or community group the need for a Code of Practice and what issues it should address;

- drawing on AQIS, other groups and existing Codes of Practice to help develop your own code;
- facilitating community awareness through industry and other organisations; and
- communicating with like-minded industry groups.

REFERENCES

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<http://www.affa.gov.au/fisheries/recfish/pamphlet/index.html>)

The AQIS website also contains many other relevant documents, which can be accessed at <http://www.aqis.gov.au/>