



April 21, 2020

Open Letter to Senators Cory A. Booker and Lindsey O. Graham and Representatives Mike Quigley and Michael T. McCaul Regarding Your Requested Ban on the International Trade of Live Wildlife

We in the responsible pet care community are extremely concerned by the threat to human health posed by the rapidly evolving coronavirus pandemic, and applaud many of the steps taken by government at all levels to help control the spread of disease and support economically devastated Americans. However, we urge you to reconsider the sweeping prohibition on international live wildlife trade that you requested in your April 8, 2020, letter to the WHO, OIE and FAO. This action would provide little defense against future novel widespread infections, while doing dramatic damage to American businesses.

Like you, we are dedicated to preventing the spread of zoonotic diseases, but so-called “wet markets,” where novel human diseases have originated, should not be conflated with the broad legal international wildlife trade. The COVID-19 virus was not spread internationally through wildlife, but instead through human-to-human contact. Wildlife has been legally imported into the U.S. for over 50 years without creating a zoonotic incident, and these animals pose no more threat to human health than imported and domestic animals that are already in the country.

According to the 2019-2020 APPA National Pet Owners Survey, 67% of American households (84.9 million) own at least one pet—and the ideal pet for over 19.5 million of those households is a reptile, small mammal, bird or fish. Many of these are wild-caught or farm-raised internationally. Those that are raised domestically come from breeders who must regularly acquire new animals from unrelated bloodlines to prevent inbreeding. Halting the legal international trade of these species would eliminate the opportunity to enjoy the physical and emotional benefits of pet ownership, such as lowering stress and blood pressure, for millions of Americans.

Just one example is aquarium stores. A ban on the importation of wildlife would unnecessarily devastate the aquarium hobby, as fish pose zero risk of being infected and carrying COVID-19, and pose little risk of carrying any zoonotic disease. There are very few marine species collected or bred in the U.S., so a ban would end saltwater aquarium keeping and the thousands of American small businesses that provide equipment, fish, supplies and maintenance services to those hobbyists would be forced to close.

Captive breeding of reptiles and arachnids has been highly successful in the United States, but these programs must continually have access to new breeding stock to ensure genetic diversity. Breeders often bring in new animals from responsible, well-regulated overseas breeding facilities. Also, many of the reptiles, small mammals such as ferrets, and arachnids bred in the United States are exported to other countries. A ban on wildlife trade would destroy the market for those artisanal breeding operations, which are often small local businesses.

We ask you to work with the WHO, OIC and FAO to ensure that these agencies' response to the COVID-19 pandemic focuses on the true threat from "wet markets" and does not create unintended consequences for responsible pet owners and businesses. Live animals for the pet trade have moved between countries successfully for decades under a heavily regulated and internationally monitored system that protects both human and animal health. A broad ban on the existing legal trade in live animals will do little to protect Americans from another novel zoonotic disease outbreak. It will only do great harm to already suffering small businesses and deprive millions of families of the joys of pet ownership.

If you have any questions or need additional information, we in the responsible pet care community stand ready to help you develop thoughtful and science-based measures to safeguard both human and animal health and well-being.

Sincerely,

Mike Bober, President and CEO, Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council

Steve King, CEO, American Pet Products Association

Vic Mason, President, World Pet Association

Celeste Powers, President, Pet Industry Distributors Association

Kevin Erickson, President, Marine Aquarium Societies of North America

Phil Goss, President, United States Association of Reptile Keepers

Robin M. Turner, Executive Director, Animal Transportation Association

Patti Strand, President, National Animal Interest Alliance