

CONVENTION ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN ENDANGERED SPECIES  
OF WILD FAUNA AND FLORA

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Nineteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties  
Panama City (Panama), 14 – 25 November 2022

THE URGENT NEED FOR RAPID TRANSPORT OF DIAGNOSTIC SAMPLES

1. This document has been submitted by the Secretariat on behalf of World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH, formerly OIE) in relation with agenda item 9.1.1.\*

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\* *The geographical designations employed in this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the CITES Secretariat (or the United Nations Environment Programme) concerning the legal status of any country, territory, or area, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. The responsibility for the contents of the document rests exclusively with its author.*

## **THE URGENT NEED FOR RAPID TRANSPORT OF WILDLIFE DIAGNOSTIC SAMPLES**

When a disease outbreak or health event arises in wildlife, it is essential to have a rapid diagnosis to understand what the disease or source of the event is, in order to inform management authorities, to allow for informed and timely communications to the public, and most importantly, to make appropriate decisions on control and management actions. A rapid diagnosis is essential to protect the species concerned as well as other animal species and, in the case of zoonosis, people that could be at risk.

In many countries, the infrastructure to carry out diagnostics are not available, and the collected diagnostic samples need to be sent to a laboratory in another country to obtain an accurate and rapid diagnosis. Most diagnostic samples also require expedited shipment and rapid clearance to maintain proper cold chain.

In the case of a wildlife health event concerning a CITES-listed species, the process to send a specimen from a CITES Appendix I or II animal species for diagnostic purposes, to a veterinary diagnostic laboratory in another country, requires one or two CITES permits (export and import or export only, respectively). Recent changes to CITES simplified procedures do not sufficiently facilitate the rapid transport of diagnostic samples from Appendix I species due to the requirement of both import and export permits even when applying the simplified procedures<sup>1</sup>.

The recent amendments to Res. Conf. 11.15 on the Scientific Exchange recognize that World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH, formerly OIE) official Reference Laboratories or Collaborating Centres all qualify for inclusion in the CITES Register of Scientific Institutions. However, such laboratories and centres exist in less than 20% of Parties to CITES, thus requiring rapid export and import of samples in most cases. There remain significant gaps in the CITES register of scientific Institutions to support rapid transport of wildlife diagnostic samples globally. Without knowing when and where the next wildlife outbreak will occur, every Party would need to go through the process of registering at least one institution, presenting both an urgent and potentially significant burden of work to fill this gap.

Frustration with current permit processes has led to a decrease in international collaboration. Many experts and laboratories responding to wildlife disease outbreaks, often on a voluntary or non-profit basis, are no longer willing to expend the time and effort required to obtain CITES permits

The examples are numerous, we would like to quote some of them to illustrate our point.

*“We have had delays shipping Steller sea lion, walrus, sea otter, ice seal and beluga samples. Currently we have had a mortality event that occurred this summer in sea otters that we suspect is due to an unknown virus. At this time routine PCR tests have been negative. We would very much like to get samples to DFO for cultures as this lab is unusually successful in obtaining virus isolates. Currently all CITES permits are expired and it will take months before*

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1 As requested by the 18th meeting of the CITES Conference of the Parties, the Secretariat has prepared and published a Guide on the Simplified Procedures and the Scientific Exchange Exemption in consultation with Parties and other stakeholders to facilitate their use inter alia in the context of the need for diagnosis.  
[https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/prog/exemptions/E\\_SimplifiedProcedures\\_endorsed\\_SC73.pdf](https://cites.org/sites/default/files/eng/prog/exemptions/E_SimplifiedProcedures_endorsed_SC73.pdf)

*new permits can be obtained. It seems that this issue is not consistent with the reason for having these permit regulations---for the protection of these species. It seems if one has a current marine mammal permit to have these samples, the CITES should have an exception for this shipping somehow.”*

*“...on multiple occasions our investigation into the cause of death for killer whales has been hampered and slowed by CITES permits. This has included sending killer whale samples from the US to Canada and from Canada to the US (despite the fact that the whales swim free across the border almost daily during certain times of the year)”*

*“While we have a blanket import permit allowing us to import whatever tissue sample from CITES appendix I-III, our challenge has been obtaining export permits from originating country. Time frame can range from 1-3 mo.[months] .... The main issue we have encountered is varying requirements from originating countries for export permits. ...We have given up sharing diagnostic samples with other reference labs overseas due to hassles of getting an export permit for each and every sample.”*

Authorizing the immediate international transfer of diagnostic wildlife samples with only the importing laboratory (and not exporting laboratory) being registered in the CITES Register of Scientific Institutions would allow for a quick and efficient transport of diagnostic specimens, a rapid diagnosis, and timely control measures that may save the population affected by the disease or the health event, reduce risk of zoonoses, and assist local authorities in more effectively communicating information to the public regarding the event and risk to other animals and people. All WOAHP official Reference Laboratories or Collaborating Centres are required to provide results to the submitting Party and to provide annual reports on all sample diagnostics.

SARS-CoV-2 has brought to light the speed at which pathogens can spread in wildlife as well as the critical need for rapid diagnostics to implement control actions. Seemingly small delays in wildlife diagnostic investigations could compromise any early measures that could be taken, tipping the balance from a rapid and effective response to a widespread insurmountable situation. The rise in significant mortality events in wildlife and the emergence of wildlife diseases in new places and previously unaffected species requires earlier detection and response as well as more international collaboration.

Rapid shipment and testing of diagnostic samples is standard practice for disease outbreaks in humans and domestic animals and therefore all CITES-listed species should be afforded the same priority, while respecting the provisions of the Convention.

The World Organisation for Animal Health and IUCN therefore welcome the decision to be considered by CoP19 contained in Annex 5 of CoP19 Doc. 9.1.1 and urge CITES Parties to consider various options to modify current simplified procedures to facilitate the rapid transport of wildlife diagnostic samples (Simplified procedures for permits and certificates, SC74 Doc. 44). WOAHP and IUCN can facilitate expert input from its experts and members to support future discussions, specifically from the IUCN SSC Wildlife Health Specialist Group and WOAHP Reference Laboratories and Collaborating Centres, who collaborate internationally, have on-ground practical wildlife health investigation and experience in CITES permits, and routinely collaborate and provide expertise internationally on animal diseases. These organizational capabilities could contribute to the CITES goal of protecting endangered and threatened species. Recognizing that rapid transport of wildlife diagnostic samples involves multiple authorities, we encourage communication, collaboration and coordinated approaches between relevant authorities (e.g. CITES Management and Scientific Authorities, Veterinary Services) in addressing this issue.