

Captive Wildlife Venomous Reptile Rule Development April, 2016



April 14, 2016

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Division of Law Enforcement



High profile escapes of non-native venomous reptiles, along with direction from the Commission, prompted staff to move forward with review of venomous reptile rules as a priority.

Current State

In Florida, there are approximately 280 venomous reptile licenses currently active under Section 379.372, Florida Statutes, and Rule 68A-6.007, Florida Administrative Code.



There are approximately 280 venomous reptile licenses (VRC) and of those, 134 also have the exhibition and sale license,(ESC) allowing them to sell their venomous reptiles.

VRC license authorizes possession and exhibition (bond needed for exhibition \$10k). An individual licensee may have multiple snakes on a single license.

In response to the two recent high profile escapes, the Captive Wildlife Section conducted Operation Slither, where all of the VR licensees statewide were inspected and had their caging evaluated for structural integrity and compliance with Florida regulations. During this operation, two citations and 71 warnings were issued for license, caging or administrative deficiencies.

Coordination With Stakeholders

Prior to and following Commission direction, staff has been working with stakeholders such as the Florida Association of Zoos and Aquariums (FAZA), commercial licensees and other interested parties through the following mechanisms:

- Series of statewide public meetings
- Online portal for recommendation submission
- Survey



Staff has been working with stakeholders prior to the Commission's direction in November, such as Florida Association of Zoos and Aquariums (FAZA), commercial licensees and other interested parties to ensure there is open communication.

Public Meetings: Staff held a series of eight statewide meetings prior to receiving direction from the Commission, from December 2014 through March 2015 to ensure that all interested parties had a venue to provide input for our captive wildlife rules. Meetings were held in Tampa, Fort Myers, Palm Beach, Miami, Panama City, Orlando, Jacksonville, and Ocala. Licensees and the public were invited to come speak with our staff and submit recommendations regarding captive wildlife rules. The meetings were held in a flow-through style with tables for different topics, so that people could come in and talk to staff/submit recommendations for the topics they were interested in.

Online Portal: An online portal was developed so that rule recommendations could be submitted electronically. Recommendations were also submitted via mail, fax, email, and verbally. Between the available outlets provided, forty three (43) recommendations regarding venomous reptiles were submitted during this time period.

Survey: After receiving direction from the Commission to move forward with VR rule review, a survey regarding possession of venomous reptiles was sent out to approximately 17,000 stakeholders in January 2016. Roughly 600 people participated in the survey. The results have shown that seventeen percent of participants currently possess venomous reptiles in Florida. Over eighty percent of participants agreed that possession of venomous reptiles should be allowed in the state but that these animals should be kept in a locked cage within an escape-proof room. Thirty seven percent recognized a need for different experience requirements based on the species.

Possible Changes

Improve Bio-Security (caging, handling and transportation)

- Improve public safety and protect Florida's native species from the possibility of an exotic venomous reptile population becoming established in the wild.



Develop Training and Certification Courses

- An alternative to the traditional 1,000 hours of experience required per family of venomous reptile prior to authorization to possess venomous reptiles.



Based on recent events, the results of Operation Slither and stakeholder input, staff strongly recommends beginning work on making modifications to rule regarding bio-security with specific attention to caging, handling and transportation. To improve biosecurity staff recommends modifications of caging requirements by requiring all cages to be locked and kept in an escape-proof room when not being transported. Handling regulations could be created to prohibit venomous reptiles being free handled outside of an escape-proof room, or at all. The use of Passive Integrated Transponder (PIT) tags could be required for all non-native species to allow for identification if a non-native venomous reptile is captured in the wild and for closer monitoring of inventory. Staff believes these increased bio-security measures may allow for continued possession of certain venomous reptiles while minimizing the risk to licensees and the general public in regards to escapes and/or bites from venomous reptiles.

Free-Handling is handling a venomous reptile outside of the reptile's enclosure, without the use of handling tools. For example, snake hook or tongs.

Escape-proof rooms: must have all possible escape routes (windows, ducts, doors, etc.) addressed to prevent escape. Escape-proof rooms are evaluated during inspections by Captive Wildlife investigators and staff is working on drafting rule language defining the term "escape-proof room."

Stakeholders in the venomous reptile industry have approached Captive Wildlife staff regarding creating training courses as an alternative to obtaining hours of experience as currently required by rule. The course would be developed collaboratively with FWC and industry experts. Potential licensees could have the option of either completing the course or obtaining the experience hours as currently required.

Possible Changes

Classification of Venomous Reptiles

Native/Non-native

- Increase bio-security
- Training and certification courses
- Limit handling



Non-Native

- Workshop classification system with a Technical Assistance Group (TAG) to develop categories for non-native venomous reptiles



Possession of native venomous reptiles would remain status quo with the enhanced bio security measures and training and certification courses.

Work with TAG to develop categories for non-native venomous reptiles ranging from continued possession to prohibitions for possession.

If the Commission directs staff to develop rules for prohibition of ownership of non native venomous reptiles, staff recommends exemptions for Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) facilities, scientific research, and grandfathering of current licensees.

Staff Recommendations

- Approve staff proposal to move forward with possible changes discussed and a classification system, gather additional stakeholder and public input and return in June, 2016 with draft rule language.
- Develop TAG to assist with the classification system and work with industry experts as well
- Additional input and direction is welcomed

