

United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

April 9, 2004

RECEIVED APR 13 2004

Mr. Patrick McConnon
Executive Director
Council of State
and Territorial Epidemiologists
Suite 303
2872 Woodcock Boulevard
Atlanta, Georgia 30341-4015

Dear Mr. McConnon:

Thank you for your letter of February 13, 2004, to Secretary Veneman on behalf of the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists (CSTE) concerning, among other things, restrictions on the import and export of exotic and wild animals.

We appreciate learning your organization's views and are pleased to provide our comments on the issues raised in CSTE's position statements. Under the Animal Health Protection Act, the Department of Agriculture (USDA) has the authority to take action to prevent a pest or disease of livestock from entering into or spreading within the United States. While animals not sold for agricultural purposes are not generally subject to our regulations, we have the authority to regulate these animals if they are vectors of a pest or disease of agricultural concern or have been inoculated with a disease for a scientific study. For example, we prohibit the importation of tenrecs—exotic animals from Madagascar sold as pets—because they are vectors of foot-and-mouth disease.

Recent incidents, such as the occurrence of monkeypox in the United States, have highlighted how Federal, State, and local agencies must work together to prevent and respond to outbreaks of zoonotic diseases. In the case of monkeypox, our Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) supported the actions of the Department of Health and Human Services' Food and Drug Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the Department of the Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service to shut down imports and transport of affected animals and otherwise address this disease.

We believe that working cooperatively with these and other Federal agencies and interested organizations—including CSTE—is a highly effective means of developing strategies to prevent similar situations from occurring in the future. APHIS officials have been and continue to be engaged in inter-agency discussions on this issue, and they would certainly be interested to participate in a working group to coordinate trade regulations on exotic and wild animals that pose a risk to human health. However, the CDC is the Agency with primary authority to address

Mr. Patrick McConnon

Page 2

public health concerns, including those involving exotic and native wildlife, and officials with that Agency would take the lead on such matters. Accordingly, we encourage you to continue working with the CDC to establish a working group that would address CSTE's concerns about the import and export of exotic and wild animals.

With regard to your organization's other concerns, we recognize the relevance of human health issues to U.S. agriculture and the importance of strengthening our Nation's public health infrastructure. Since 1984, we have sponsored a number of veterinary medical officers (VMOs) from APHIS' Veterinary Services staff in the CDC Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS), an intensive 2-year training program in applied epidemiology. As you know, EIS officers work with public health officials in all levels of government—including the State and local level—to provide epidemiologic assistance throughout the United States and abroad. Through this program, our VMOs have the opportunity to apply their veterinary training and skills to public health problems and issues. APHIS will continue to support such cooperative efforts and explore other opportunities to help strengthen our Nation's epidemiologic workforce.

Thank you again for writing and sharing your organization's views with us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Bill Hawks". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Bill Hawks
Under Secretary
Marketing and Regulatory Programs