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# Florida Fish And Wildlife Conservation Commission Tightens Restrictions On Non-Native Reptiles

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The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission voted Thursday on a final rule change regarding restrictions on non-native reptiles.

The commission was inundated with public input — going nearly two hours past its allotted time with over 200 callers — but in the end unanimously approved the final ruling.

This rule moves 16 different non-native reptile species including tegus and green iguanas to the prohibited list, tightening restrictions on the importation, breeding, and possession of such animals. Some revisions were made to the draft that was proposed in July.

Commercial breeding of tegus and green iguanas will not be immediately banned but phased out until June 30, 2024. This allows [current businesses to continue their operations](#) and make necessary adjustments to adhere to the revised rules.

Pet owners and others in possession of these 16 invasive species will have 90 days to come into compliance except on caging requirements where they will have 180 days to improve outdoor enclosures to bring them into compliance with the new caging rules.

Furthermore, the number of individuals that will qualify for limited exceptions to exhibit iguanas and tegus will be expanded on circumstances. The criteria for issuing permits for research of species has been modified to remove specific affiliations for research applicants.

Environmentalists, pet owners and business owners voiced their concerns regarding these updated regulations at the meeting.

Reptile owners voiced their concerns over what this means for enthusiasts such as themselves. “To me, pets are family. This isn’t just numbers; this is asking people to give up their family members.” one concerned reptile owner said.

Melissa Tucker, habitat and species conservation director at the commission, reassured them that no one will need to give up their pets: “Pet owners can keep their tegus and iguanas for the remainder of their lives.”

For many people, these reptiles are considered to be family, but to Florida’s native wildlife, they are a threat. Despite hundreds of calls from business owners and reptile enthusiasts, the well-being of the state’s native species is being prioritized.

“The Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission’s duty is to protect the wildlife and wild spaces of Florida,” said Elise Paulter Bennett, an environmental attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity, “There is no question that’s what this rule will do.”

Invasive animals offset the balance of an ecosystem. For Florida, this is no small consequence.

Pedro Ramos, superintendent of the Everglades and Dry Tortugas National Parks, reported that roughly 80% of its mammal population has disappeared due to invasive interference.

Introducing invasive species to an environment in which they have no natural predators caused irreparable damage to these ecosystems. In Cape Coral, Nile Monitors — one of the 16 prohibited species — prey on the states’ threatened species such as burrowing owls and gopher tortoises. The ground-nesting wildlife is just one of many that suffer the consequences of these invasive populations.

Bennett expressed her support for the approval of the rules.

“These commonsense measures to stop the commercial trade of a few of the most highly invasive reptiles will reduce the risk of even more escapes and releases into the wild,” Bennett said. “This gives Florida regulators a critical tool to protect our native wildlife and wild places. All Floridians are impacted by these highly invasive reptiles, whether they realize it or not. Aside from causing extensive damage to Florida’s unique natural

landscapes, controlling these destructive animals costs taxpayers millions of dollars every year.”

The economic impact of these species is detrimental to Florida, state data show.

At the South Florida Water Management District, Drew Bartlett reported expenses of more than \$2 million annually that are put toward managing pythons and iguanas.

“Breeding invasive exotic species in Florida is like playing with matches in a tinderbox,” said Julie Wraithmell, vice president and executive director of Audubon Florida. “With such hospitable winters, a few escapes can become populations, and then taxpayers and private landowners are on the hook for millions annually in eradication and management costs.”

Despite combatting the consequences that the high-risk invasive reptiles pose to Florida’s wildlife and economy, not everyone was in support of the heightened restrictions.

“100% of my income is generated from python sales,” said Chris Cannarozzi, owner of Mystic Reptiles in Gainesville. “Nobody is debating that Burmese pythons are not an issue in south Florida, but the situation is unique to that species. Not every invasive animal is going to have the same situation. There are other options that can ensure the protection of native wildlife without destroying small businesses like myself.”

For some Florida residents, their livelihoods rely on these reptiles. Changing restrictions on transportation, breeding, and proper containment leaves many to fear that they will be out of business overnight.

The cost of reconstructing cages that meet the new regulations within the allotted time was a topic of concern for current reptile owners, especially those in the breeding and trade business.

“No one is going to spend that much money on something they’re only going to be able to do for two years,” Phil Goss, president of the United States Association of Reptile Keepers, said. “Even though the Fish and Wildlife Commission calls it a sunset, this is really a ban on tegus and green iguanas too.”

Prohibiting the breeding and sales of these invasive species is foreseen to fuel an underground market instead of actually preventing any future business.

Business owners want to make it clear that they are in favor of protecting and maintaining the state's natural beauty, despite being opposed to the commission's new rules on reptiles.

"The reptile community cares for the environment too," said Kayla Young, owner of NKS Reptiles. "We love our environment here in Florida, we want to see it thrive."

After hearing the public's comments, the commission made some last-minute alterations to the proposal. The commission unanimously approved the proposed rule changes.

"I'm very sensitive to the people in the pet trade and enthusiasts. But this action is a result of the invasive species that continue to get into the wild," Commissioner Robert Spottswood said. "We have so many of these species now: pythons, tegus, iguanas. These animals are doing lots of damage and we are incumbent to do something."