

Deadline Approaches For USDA's Animal Transport Proposal

The USDA is seeking public comments on its Animal Transport Proposal, which specifies an 8-week-minimum age for shipping warm-blooded animals.

By SmallAnimalChannel News Division

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The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service will continue accepting public comments on its proposal to establish 8 weeks as the minimum age for transporting warm-blooded animals, except birds, through July 8 at its website.

Specifically, the proposal specifies that "no animal, other than (sic) birds, be delivered by any person to any carrier or intermediate handler for transportation in commerce by any person unless the animal is with its mother or has been weaned and is at least 8 weeks of age."

The agency is currently developing separate standards for birds, which is why they were not including in this proposal.

The agency said it is especially interested in receiving public comments about smaller animals, including guinea pigs and ferrets, because it recognizes the blanket 8-week limit, which was based on existing regulations for cats and dogs, may be too restrictive for certain species.

"While we are proposing to use 8 weeks as the minimum age standard in this document, we recognize that some species are naturally weaned at an earlier age," the agency wrote in its proposal. "We welcome any comments or suggestions regarding particular species or circumstances in which it might be appropriate to have a minimum age requirement greater or less than 8 weeks."

The agency has already discounted the possibility of allowing the shipping of weaned animals regardless of age because "brokers and dealers could falsely state that the animal has been weaned in order to allow them to transport the animal prematurely."

The agency also considered a two-tiered system based on animal weight, noting that small animals (less than 15 pounds) are weaned earlier and could be shipped at 4 weeks of age. However, it acknowledged that those figures were also somewhat arbitrary and would like input in developing a more suitable tiered approach.

"We welcome public and industry comment on the potential impacts of a two-tiered system for classifying animals for transport, including specific criteria we should consider when classifying animals into tiers and timeframes for weaning that can be applied to each tier," the agency wrote, with a specific eye toward "entities that broker and breed small pets."

This issue also concerns the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council, which notes the rule as proposed would "severely impact rodents and possibly the availability of feeder animals" in an alert issued this week.

"A number of species in the pet trade, specifically rodents, are weaned a lot sooner than eight weeks," PIJAC writes. "In fact, some have reached sexual maturity at eight weeks. There is simply no justification to adopt such a broad-based eight week rule that is not relevant to many species."

PIJAC plans to submit comments on the proposal and solicited comments and suggestions from members to consider when preparing its comments. Interested parties can contact PIJAC's Michael Maddox at mmaddox@pijac.org or 202-452-1525.

The government expects its proposal would result in minimal costs to affected parties, notably increased cost for feeding animals kept longer (it estimates the daily cost of feeding small mammals, specifically ferrets and guinea pigs, at less than \$1 per day) and slightly increased shipping costs associated with shipping heavier animals.

The government agency proposed the rule, which allows exemptions for transporting younger animals for research and medical purposes, "to help ensure the humane treatment of the animals." The agency said "longstanding experience and general veterinary medical experience and knowledge support the conclusion that shipping young animals increases the risk of illness and death in these animals," but said it didn't have actual studies to support that conclusion.