



PRESS RELEASE

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Brown Tree Snake in a Bottle Found at Airport Departure Check Point on Guam

Officials on Guam believe someone intended to smuggle a brown tree snake on an outbound flight on February 19, 2004. At approximately 3:30 a.m. a live brown tree snake was found inside a sealed plastic bottle at a security screening counter for departing flights. The snake was turned over to a Customs and Quarantine officer who held the snake until it was retrieved by a USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services canine handler. The USDA Wildlife Services employee conducted interviews with everyone present in the area at the time of the discovery, yet no one had any idea how the snake got there.

Officials believe that someone was planning to carry the animal with them on a trip, but decided against it, perhaps due to enhanced security screening for other items. Airport employees reported that they have encountered other kinds of abandoned contraband in similar circumstances. It is not known which flight the passenger/s carrying the snake were intending to board, or what the destination was.

“A large group had just checked in for a Tokyo flight. Check in was open for a Honolulu flight, although the flight does not leave until 6:45 a.m.,” states Dan Vice of USDA Wildlife Services on Guam.

USDA Wildlife Services maintains about 3,200 snake traps on Guam around ports of exit, power stations and electrical transfer stations, and conducts searches of outbound cargo and vessels using dogs. They caught over 12,300 snakes in 2002. However, Wildlife Services does not conduct searches of passengers or passenger areas. Mike Pitzler of USDA Wildlife Services in Honolulu said, “This is exactly the type of situation we aren’t set up to detect. Unless our staff happen to be in the area and one of the dogs walks up to you and smells it, we’ll never find it.”

HDOA inspects cargo and vessels arriving from Guam as a final precaution and a necessary step in preventing any snakes that may have slipped through the USDA pre-departure inspection program. However, HDOA does not screen arriving passengers.

Prevention Measures and Needs

USDA Wildlife Services on Guam conducts inspections for hitchhiking brown tree snakes in planes, ships and cargo leaving Guam, bound for Hawaii, Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas and other snake-free islands. However, participation in these programs is largely voluntary. It is not known how much cargo leaving Guam goes uninspected. Therefore, a bill has been introduced in the legislature to address this. If passed, it would authorize HDOA to restrict the entry of articles originating from Guam that have not been certified as inspected for the snakes by Wildlife Services or other approved agency, prior to departure.

While this would reduce the chance that brown tree snakes could be introduced by accidental means, this does not address the issue of individuals who intentionally smuggle snakes into the state, as may have been the case in this incident.

In Hawaii there were 236 credible snake sightings between 1990 and 2000. 63 were either captured roaming free or found dead in the wild, 74 were surrendered as pets, and 99 snakes were never recovered. In summary, during those ten years, we retrieved 115 snakes that had been smuggled into the state, while 22 snakes were unintentional hitchhikers; 4 of the 22 were brown treesnakes (Kraus and Cravalho, 2001).

Part of the reason the state is so at risk from new invasive pests is that the agencies responsible for preventing the introduction of pests and conducting control work are not adequately funded to do the job. In addition, budget cuts and a dangerous policy of no-growth in state government has resulted in the inability to conduct adequate programs. A third aspect of this problem is that funding and programs have not risen commensurate with the marked increase in the amount of goods and vessels arriving in Hawaii. In the case of brown tree snakes, reductions in funding for USDA Wildlife Services this fiscal year means that Hawaii has to be extra vigilant.

A part of DLNR's supplemental budget request for \$5,000,000 for the initial year of a four-year funding request and a 1:1 non-state match would provide key funding for HDOA's inspection capabilities. This unprecedented budget request would not replace any of the existing state, private, or federal funding, but is intended to complement and expand on existing programs that have suffered decades of no-growth or cutbacks while introductions and spread of invasive pests have increased exponentially.

The public can help by voicing support for the \$5 million supplemental budget request for better protection from invasive pests like brown tree snakes. Snakes or snake smuggling activities can be reported to the HDOA Pest Hotline, 586-PEST (7378), and the HDOA amnesty program is available for anyone wishing to turn in contraband pets.

Brown treesnakes were introduced to Guam in the 1950's and within 20 years they decimated Guam's native and alien bird fauna. Population densities have been estimated at 13,000 per square mile in some areas. For more information on brown tree snakes, visit http://www.fort.usgs.gov/resources/education/bts/bts_home.asp



Christy Martin is the Public Information Officer for the statewide Coordinating Group on Alien Pest Species (CGAPS) and the Invasive Species Committees of Hawaii (ISCs), statewide and island-based partnerships working to protect Hawaii from invasive species.

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