



OLR RESEARCH REPORT

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POSSESSION OF SKUNKS

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You asked if (1) Connecticut law prohibits possessing a skunk as a pet and (2) any legislation has been proposed in the last 15 years to allow such possession. You also asked if skunks can be vaccinated for rabies like cats and dogs. Lastly, you asked for an update of [OLR Report 2003-R-0394](#), regarding other states that permit possession of skunks.

SUMMARY

State law prohibits (1) with some exceptions, possessing skunks and (2) breeding, propagating, and selling skunks. No state legislation has been proposed in the last 15 years (1997-2011) to allow possession of skunks in Connecticut.

Skunks cannot be vaccinated for rabies, like cats and dogs can be, because there is no licensed vaccine available that is effective on wild animals.

The following 17 states allow possession of skunks: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, New Jersey, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. All but Wyoming have special conditions for the possession to be legal. Most require a potential skunk owner to get a state permit and obtain the skunk from a licensed in-state breeder.

STATE LAW

Public Act 80-460 (sSB 333) made it illegal to (1) breed, propagate, or sell skunks and (2) possess skunks purchased in a Connecticut retail establishment after May 1, 1979 (codified as CGS § 26-40). With the approval of the environmental protection commissioner, skunks may be kept in zoos, nature centers, museums, laboratories, or research facilities, provided the general public is not permitted to handle them.

According to the public hearing testimony on SB 333 (March 11, 1980), the Department of Health Services (now the Department of Public Health) proposed the ban on the sale and breeding of skunks because of the potential threat of rabies. Patricia Checko, the department's epidemiology consultant in infectious diseases, noted that, in the United States, skunks accounted for over 50% of all wildlife rabies cases with rabid skunks being reported from 28 states at that time. She further noted that immunizing wildlife against rabies was not effective because there was no licensed vaccine that had been found to work in wild animals. Finally, she stated that skunks are wild animals; there is no such thing as a pure bred domestic skunk.

CURRENT THEORY AND RABIES

According to the Department of Agriculture, there is still no known licensed vaccine that is effective against rabies in skunks. Therefore, skunks cannot be vaccinated against the disease. Skunks remain a "rabies vector animal," meaning rabies is quite prevalent in skunks.

According to the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP):

The DEEP, Department of Public Health, and Department of Agriculture do not support removing the prohibition of skunks as pets. This restriction was enacted in 1980 due to public health concerns as a result of rabies outbreaks in the pet trade.

Skunks are a major rabies vector species in the United States and the second most commonly confirmed animal with rabies in Connecticut. There is no rabies vaccine approved or licensed by the USDA for wildlife, including skunks. This means that any human exposures to pet skunks would have to be treated as potential rabies exposure in accordance with national rabies protocol, resulting in costly human treatments and destruction of the biting animal (Mark Clavetter, wildlife biologist, DEEP).

Rabies

According to the Department of Public Health, rabies is a viral disease, primarily of animals, caused by infection of the brain and spinal cord. People get rabies from the bite of an infected animal. In many areas in the developing world, including Asia, Africa, and South America, it is caused most often by dog bites. In the United States, where rabies in dogs has been largely eliminated, rabies is still widespread in wildlife. Bats, raccoons, skunk, and fox are the major sources of potential infection for other animals and people. For more information on rabies, see <http://www.ct.gov/dph/cwp/view.asp?a=3136&q=396178> and <http://www.cdc.gov/rabies/>.

According to DEEP, skunks are one of the most common sources of wildlife problems experienced by Connecticut homeowners. Because they can carry rabies, they can no longer be live-trapped and relocated. Animals that appear sick or that are acting abnormally should be avoided. The following symptoms may indicate the presence of rabies or other neurological diseases: unprovoked aggression, impaired movement, paralysis or lack of coordination, unusually friendly behavior, and disorientation. If a person sees this behavior in an animal, he or she should avoid the animal and notify the local animal control officer. For more information on skunks, see http://www.ct.gov/dep/lib/dep/wildlife/pdf_files/outreach/fact_sheets/skunk.pdf.

OTHER STATES

With some restrictions, 17 states allow the possession of a skunk as a pet. Table 1 lists the states and the special conditions for the possession to be legal.

Table 1: STATES THAT ALLOW POSSESSION OF SKUNKS, 2011

<i>State</i>	<i>Special Conditions</i>
Alabama	Permit required; must be obtained from a state licensed breeder
Florida	Permit required
Georgia	Illegal to possess black or black and white skunks, but all other colors are legal
Indiana	Permit required
Iowa	Permit required; must be obtained from a state licensed breeder
Kentucky	Not legal in all counties; permit required; must obtain from an in-state breeder
Michigan	Permit required; must obtain from in-state breeder; cage requirements must be met
New Jersey	Permit required; must obtain from in-state breeder
Ohio	Permit required; must obtain from state licensed dealer, breeder, or pet store
Oklahoma	Permit required; must obtain from a state licensed dealer or breeder
Oregon	Permit required; cannot sell skunks within the state
Pennsylvania	Permit required; must obtain from state licensed dealer or breeder
South Carolina	Cannot buy or sell skunks after July 3, 2003; cannot import skunks
South Dakota	License required; cage requirements must be met
West Virginia	Must obtain in-state
Wisconsin	License required; cage requirements must be met
Wyoming	No special conditions

Source: SkunkHaven.net (<http://www.skunkhaven.net/StatesForm.htm>)