

Compromise Reached in Proposed Fish Ban

A last-minute compromise has been reached regarding European Union fish importation.

By David Alderton

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Tiger barb by Tony Terceira.

What is effectively a last-minute compromise has been reached between European Union (EU) officials and representatives of the aquatic industry, regarding the importation of fish from Malaysia, which is the major center for the trade in southeast Asia. There was a real prospect of a ban on the importation of all barb (Puntius species), red-tailed black sharks and other Labeo species, not to mention gouramis (Trichogaster species) and spiny eels (Mastacembelus species) amongst other genera into EU countries. These fish represent a major segment of the aquarium industry worldwide.

This group had been included in the EU Directive on Aquatic Animal Health (reference 2006/88/EC), as representing a potential hazard to native species within the EU's borders. The Directive itself makes two fish diseases - Koi Herpes Virus (KHV) and Epizootic Ulcerative Syndrome (EUS) notifiable throughout the EU for the first time. While at present, KHV is the better-known infection, EUS potentially affects a much wider range of species than just the carp (Cyprinus carpio) and its ornamental relatives such as koi.

EUS is believed to be caused primarily by a fungus called *Aphanomyces invadans* which results in ulceration of the skin and then spreads within the body, attacking the organs. Mortality amongst infected fish is high, and opportunistic bacteria and viruses may also be identified in outbreaks. EUS appears to be a seasonal infection, occurring not just in fresh water but also in brackish areas as well.

The disease has been identified in parts of southern Asia and was recently recorded from western areas of the continent. It can affect both wild-caught and farmed fish. Only susceptible species that had been bred and kept at localities certified as being free from EUS could have been imported into the EU under the original proposal.

This legislation came about as the result of a visit to the region by officials from the EU Food and Veterinary Office back in 2005. Their report concluded that there were "significant shortcomings" in fish health regulations in Malaysia. A follow-up visit in 2008 apparently found little sign of improvement, relating to registration of fish farms and disease control in general, leading the European Commission to bring forward legislation covering this area.

Ornamental Fish International (OFI) highlighted the fact that the information provided by DEFRA (the Department of Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, based in the UK) and OIE (the Office International des Epizooties, which is the intergovernmental organization responsible for improving animal health worldwide) indicated that only one species within each of the Puntius and Labeo genera have been recorded as suffering from EUS, rather than the list of some 350 species which had been drawn up for the Directive.

The proportionality of the risk and response was also highlighted by the Ornamental Aquatic Trade Association (OATA), in its response to the draft legislation. OATA's Chief Executive, Keith Davenport told Practical Fishkeeping magazine that his organization has "always argued that any measures must address real practical risks rather than theoretical possibilities identified by office-based analyses.

"While disease has been reported in the genera listed as susceptible to EUS, there is no evidence of imports for the ornamental trade causing problems in the EU. Thus many decades of practical experience has failed to reveal a practical risk," added Keith. In fact, the disease has never been diagnosed in the UK, in spite of being originally identified 37 years ago.

As OATA also emphasized, the EU Directive itself acknowledges that fish, especially tropical species, held in aquariums and ornamental ponds do not pose the same risk as those intended for release into the wild. Importation of a number of coldwater fish from Malaysia, including goldfish, koi and tench have, however, been banned under this new legislation, but the reality is that the impact could have been much more serious for the aquatic industry throughout Europe, if it had not been for the measured arguments of the trade associations.