

Pet Imports from South Africa

Background:

Until recently it had been possible to import dogs and cats directly from South Africa, whereupon they underwent 6 months quarantine. The question of importing pets from South Africa has been considered and studied carefully and at length. Because of a number of significant factors, legislation¹ was amended in 2011 after public consultation to make South Africa and all other countries except the UK and Ascension not eligible for direct importation of pets. Subsequent to this amendment St Helena will no longer provide a quarantine service for pets. It is, however, still possible to bring a pet to St Helena from virtually anywhere in the world. This paper explains the reasons behind this legislation, and how to import your pet.

Reasons:

- There is an acknowledged international rise in the spread of animal diseases in general due to increased movements of animals and animal products – both legal and illegal;
- Direct importation from South Africa would have to apply to the whole nation, not just zones considered relatively disease free. SA has long, ‘leaky’ borders especially with the poorly disease-controlled nations of Zimbabwe and Mozambique, and we cannot take a piecemeal approach to South Africa and the relevant legislation;
- The SA department of agriculture (DAFF) appears overstretched and we have had very limited responses to other initiatives. We cannot therefore rely on watertight services for any regulations that we may make to be handled at that end, which includes certification;
- Any imports would have to undergo an array of tests as St Helena is relatively ‘clean’ and at just 47 square miles has a small and sensitive ecosystem. It also has a number of important parasites which act as disease vectors, notably ticks, all imported from Africa in the past. This is combined with the perfect climate for incubating and propagating disease. Tests also apply to pet imports from the UK where we have DEFRA (department of agriculture) agreed certificates, officially appointed veterinarians (OVs), and accredited laboratories to do the work. SA does not have these standardised facilities to any acceptable degree;
- For the reasons above, SA certification cannot come up to our required standard;
- The old island system of 6 months quarantine has been abolished and is now deemed both impractical (cost and lack of personnel to operate; cost of maintaining modern quarantine facilities; and, in these straitened times, poor value for money spent) and unacceptable (animal welfare and behavioural changes in dogs; owners breaching and negating quarantine because of ease and proximity);
- Legislation was therefore changed to utilise the better resourced services of our parent nation, the UK. Pets can come from anywhere in the world, but having (a) first satisfied UK requirements, and (b) secondly satisfied St Helena’s requirements;
- From 1st Jan 2012, the UK relaxed import requirements, so that SA pets can now avoid any quarantine using a 4 month protocol at home prior to travel. This relaxation was a long known condition enforced by the EU on the UK as differences in import controls are seen as barriers to trade; the basis is political, not scientific. It is accepted that the price to pay is the arrival of some exotic diseases in the UK, a process that has already begun;
- As a result, disease sensitive nations such as Australia and New Zealand treat even the UK as ‘dirty’ – a potential source of contagious disease. Our UK DEFRA approved certificate is modelled on these nations as well as our requirements for the very same reasons. St Helena is NOT the UK, and as a

small island nation, is sensitive to the incursion of any new disease into a susceptible population. This is a risk that the island neither wants to take, nor needs to take. However, diverting pets via the UK allows St Helena to have other tests performed in accredited laboratories and certificated by official veterinarians. It also creates the appropriate delay between rabies vaccination and arrival on the island (see below);

- The UK's relaxation of rules weakens our measures, but still builds in an approximately 6 month period for imports from SA which will act as a relaxed form of quarantine. This is vital. Contrary to popular belief, rabies vaccination is neither a guarantee against infection, nor does it cure infection if it is already present. Rabies can take over 6 months to appear. The process of importing via the UK does not cause a delay: 6 months isolation in quarantine has been swapped for 6 months preparation of which 4 months can be spent at home. It does however involve greater expense;
- While rabies is NOT our only concern, it is paramount. We test for a range of blood borne and arthropod transmitted diseases which would prosper here. But it is of interest to note that the last rabies case in the UK occurred after 6 months quarantine.
- It is also of interest to note that while one case of rabies in Europe is a major issue, South Africa is reporting between 300 and 500 cases per annum to the OIE (Organisation of World Animal Health: 2009 – 522; 2010 – 401; 2011 - 316). This excludes undiagnosed cases, cases in feral/wild animals, and cases which have died un-noted. Whilst SA has a rabies vaccination programme, these figures illustrate the widespread uncontrolled nature of the disease on the continent and its potential threat.
- Whilst the UK can absorb the risk by virtue of the country's scale, surveillance facilities and response teams, St Helena cannot. In addition, whilst the UK would receive a relatively low proportion of pets per square mile of land mass from countries with poor rabies control, St Helena would receive a very high proportion, and the risk is therefore multiplied.
- A single rabies case in St Helena would drastically alter the island's international legal status voiding import/export certification arrangements with the EU, place islanders at risk, result in a kill policy for exposed stock and pets, and set back the embryonic tourist industry.

Current protocol:

Under an obligation to align with the EU, DEFRA UK has publicised new pet import rules which came into effect 1st January 2012. There is now no UK quarantine for pets from Third Countries as long as a specific protocol is followed. The protocol is currently, in order:

Implant microchip;

1. Vaccinate against rabies (if no microchip before this, then even if already vaccinated);
2. Blood test at least 30 days after vaccination;
3. Wait 3 calendar months from date of successful blood test;
4. Treat for tapeworm 1-5 days pre expected ARRIVAL time in UK;
5. Acquire official documentation from vet;
6. Import via official entry route (<http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-pets/pets/travel/pets/routes/>)

NOTE: These are DEFRA's rules and no responsibility can be taken by ANRD, St Helena for their accuracy. Up-to-date details should always be checked on the DEFRA website (<http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-pets/pets/travel/>).

Once the UK has been entered, the pet owner will need to apply for the St Helena certificate from DEFRA's Carlisle office (CentralOps.Carlisle@AnimalHealth.gsi.gov.uk). St Helena is still free from many diseases, and further blood testing requirements take approximately 1 month. From vaccination in South Africa to landing the pet in St Helena, an owner can expect the whole process to take 5-6 months. To reach St Helena there is a monthly Ministry of Defence vessel sailing from Southampton with excellent on-board kenneling facilities. This vessel provides the link to the *RMS St Helena* at Ascension. The RAF Brize Norton flight will not take pets, only military and police dogs.

Going back to South Africa:

An additional complication is that DAFF, South Africa also has stringent rules for the importation of pets, and South African nationals should be aware that **under current SA rules it is not possible to return your pet directly to South Africa from St Helena.** Apart from some practical difficulties that arise with specific requested blood tests, the only legal routes of entry are Johannesburg, Capetown and – under certain circumstances – Durban international airports. DAFF have indicated that under no circumstances can an alternative route be used. The return trip would therefore also require the pet to travel via the UK.

THE DECISION TO REFUSE DIRECT IMPORTS OF PETS FROM SOUTH AFRICA AND OTHER NATIONS HAS BEEN BASED ON RISK ASSESSMENT AND SCIENCE, ***ONE WHICH IS DESIGNED TO PROTECT THE HEALTH AND WELFARE OF OUR ANIMALS AND PEOPLE.*** THIS IS THE OVERRIDING PRINCIPLE.

Further information can be obtained from the Senior Veterinary Officer joe-hollins@enrd.gov.sh , tel: 4724.

¹ Animal (Diseases) Ordinance & Regulations, Cap. 96