

# Canine Importation: Time for Discussion

**J. Scott Weese, DVM, DVSc, DACVIM**

Editor in Chief, Clinician's Brief  
University of Guelph

The recent emergence of H3N2 canine influenza in the United States, with many affected dogs across the Midwest, has focused attention on canine importation. Importation of rescued dogs from South Korea has likely resulted in transmission of this virus to North America with potential major impacts. This is just one of many examples of imported diseases that threaten dogs, humans, or both.

I have raised this issue for some time because of the problems we have seen in my region. My first exposure to potential impacts of large-scale importation was the large number of heartworm-infected dogs affected by Hurricane Katrina and shipped into Ontario in 2005. Now, we see dogs that already have a diagnosis of leishmaniasis with owners who have been given a false assurance that it is an easily treated disease imported from foreign countries (eg, Greece). There is also emerging evidence that the particularly nasty zoonotic parasite *Echinococcus multilocularis* has likely become established in the canid population in Ontario (and presumably more widely), probably from international importation of infected dogs.

I recently spoke to a veterinarian whose client imported a puppy from the Caribbean. That puppy died of distemper shortly after arrival, but not before infecting the unvaccinated puppy that was already in the home, which also subsequently died. These calls are, sadly, becoming more common.

Importation of dogs raises many issues and much emotion. Whereas I can understand a situation in which a traveler in a developing country meets a stray dog and wants to bring it home, I do not understand why large amounts of money are spent to bulk import dogs, nor do I understand why dogs known to be sick or unvaccinated are imported. Further, I do not understand why importation regulations in many countries are so lax that they are virtually non-existent (yes, Canada and the United States—I'm talking to you).

International adoption is typically great for the adopted dog, no doubt, but the number of homes for dogs is finite. If 1000 dogs are imported (presumably a marked underestimate), it is doubtful that these went to 1000 homes that would not have otherwise adopted a dog. Massive numbers of adoptable dogs are euthanized in North American shelters every year. Does it make sense to invest so many resources to import dogs



**The recent emergence of H3N2 canine influenza into the United States, with many affected dogs across the Midwest, has focused attention on canine importation.**

continues

when a local shelter dog may be euthanized?

We need to think about why and how dogs are imported, and we need to address these questions:

- Is there a net benefit to the dog population, or does importation harm local adoption efforts?
- Is the vanity factor why most people get an imported dog? (*Yes, you have a nice new phone, but look at Vladimir, my rescue dog from Siberia.*)
- Is it because there is truly an unmet need for certain dogs in North America?
- Is it because there is inadequate education about the over-abundance of local adoptable dogs?
- Do our lax importation rules create risk to our dog population and the public?

It's not that we in the veterinary profession should be in a position to dictate how people spend their money or what dog they adopt; however, when some of those decisions can impact broader animal and human health, the profession must play a leading role in initiating and providing a medical basis to these discussions. ■ **cb**



**Comments? Questions?  
Send your thoughts to  
[editor@cliniciansbrief.com](mailto:editor@cliniciansbrief.com)**

**The profession must play a leading role in initiating and providing a medical basis to these discussions.**