

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC HEARING COMMENTS

Hearing Officer: David Kalb, Supervising Wildlife Biologist

RIDEM Staff Present: Phillip Edwards, Chief of Fish and Wildlife
Melissa Curry, Administrative Assistant
Sarah Riley, Chief Implementation Aide
Christine Dudley, Deputy Chief of Fisheries
Alan Libby, Supervising Biologist, Fisheries
Christopher Thawley, Herpetologist/SGCN Coordinator
Charles Tappero, Chief Program Development

The public hearing for the 2026-27 Importation and Possession of Wild Animals was held on May 12, 2026, at 5:43 PM at 1B Camp E-Hun-Tee Place Exeter, RI 02822. Thirteen (13) people from the public attended the hearing.

The hearing was called to order at 5:43 PM by Supervising Wildlife Biologist David Kalb.

D. Kalb – Supervising Wildlife Biologist, (DK): DK introduced himself and announced he was there to officiate on behalf of Terrence Gray, Director of DEM.

This hearing is being conducted to the Rules & Regulations under the authority of chapters 42-17.1; 20-1-18; 20-16-1; and pursuant to the procedural requirements of Chapter 42-35, "Administrative Procedures" of the General Laws of Rhode Island of 1956, as amended.

In accordance with the above referenced requirements, a public notice of this hearing was posted on the Secretary of States DEM computer websites on April 13th, 2026. A copy of the notarized affidavit of such posting is attached to the record of this proceeding as **Exhibit #1** and **Exhibit #2**.

For this regulatory proceedings, pursuant to the requirements of Section 42-35-3 of the Rhode Island General Laws, DEM has made the following determinations. DEM has complied with the requirements of Section § 42-35.1-3 of the Rhode Island General Laws. The DEM has provided prior notice to the Governor's Office and the DOA of the proposed promulgation of these Rules & Regulations and none of these offices has notified DEM that it has identified any of these proposed regulations as one that may have significant adverse economic impacts on small businesses. Despite the above, DEM specifically requests comments on the proposal as to how the proposed regulations can be changed so that the adverse economic impact(s) can be minimized or eliminated.

The purpose of this hearing is to afford interested parties an opportunity to submit data, views, or arguments orally and/or in writing on the proposed Rules & Regulations. This hearing is not intended as a means of providing a forum for discussions, debating, arguing, or otherwise having any dialogue at the time with members of the Division.

The procedure we will follow for those persons who wish to speak is as follows:

The procedure for the public comment hearing is as follows:

1. Please register at the table.
2. Speakers will be called in the order of registration.
3. Five (5) minutes was allocated for a presentation unless the number of speakers allows for additional time.
4. When your name is called, please:
 - a. Come to the podium; and identify yourself by name and affiliation, if any.
 - b. Make your presentation; and then
 - c. Provide a written copy of your statement for the record if one is available.

After today's hearing the recording will be kept open until the close of business at 4pm on May 20th, 2026, to permit the submission of any written data, views, arguments, or commentary on the proposed Rules and Regulations.

After that time has elapsed for the submission of written commentary the Department has three (3) options:

1. File the rules and regulations with the Secretary of State as is.
2. File the rules and regulations with minor changes, OR
3. Make additional amendments to the rules and regulations and hold a new public hearing.

If filed, the rules and regulations become effective twenty (20) days after filing and have the effect of law.

D. Kalb calls on Kimberly Alpert:

Good evening and thank you for the opportunity to speak tonight regarding the proposed amendments to 250-RICR-40-05-3. My name is Kimberly Alpert and I am the Treasurer of the New England Herpetological Society here to represent our members in Rhode Island. The NEHS is a 501c3 Non-profit dedicated to supporting education and conservation regarding herptiles in the New England area as well as those kept in captivity. I appreciate the Department's responsibility to protect Rhode Island's environment and public safety. However, I respectfully oppose both a ban and the newly proposed permit requirements for tegus because I do not believe there is sufficient evidence showing that additional regulation is necessary in Rhode Island. For years, responsible owners and breeders in this state have safely kept these animals without documented problems involving established wild populations, environmental damage, or widespread public safety concerns. In preparing for tonight, we reviewed available information going back several years, and we could not find evidence of any meaningful tegu-related problem occurring in Rhode Island. I am aware that recent studies have examined how climate change could potentially expand suitable habitat for certain tegu species in parts of the United States. However, it is important to understand what those studies actually say — and what they do not say. The study most often referenced modeled broad climate suitability across large geographic regions using computer projections. The authors

themselves acknowledged important limitations, including that the models do not account for many real-world survival factors such as prey availability, land cover, breeding success, detection uncertainty, and microclimates. Most importantly, the study does not conclude that tegus can establish self-sustaining breeding populations in Rhode Island or throughout the Northeast. In fact, even the researchers noted that their work represents only a theoretical climate suitability model — not proof that populations could successfully survive, reproduce, and spread in a given state. Tegus are reptiles that depend heavily on heat, controlled environments, and specialized husbandry to survive and thrive. In captivity, they require heated enclosures, UVB lighting, regulated humidity, and carefully maintained temperatures year-round. Rhode Island's winters include prolonged freezing temperatures, frozen ground conditions, and extended periods far below the temperature's tegus require for normal activity and survival. Because of these environmental realities, I respectfully question whether there is sufficient Rhode Island specific evidence showing these animals could realistically establish and sustain breeding wild populations here. I am also concerned that creating permit requirements for animals that have been responsibly kept for years may unintentionally burden compliant owners while doing little to address irresponsible behavior. Law-abiding keepers are often the people most willing to cooperate with the Department, maintain proper enclosures, and seek veterinary care when needed. I am additionally concerned about unintended consequences. When regulations become overly restrictive or confusing, some individuals may become fearful about seeking help, rehoming animals responsibly, or remaining transparent about ownership. I do not believe anyone wants policies that could unintentionally increase abandonment, improper release, or animal welfare concerns. Most responsible reptile keepers are not asking for special treatment. We are simply asking that the state continue the approach that has already worked successfully for many years without demonstrated problems. I respectfully urge the Department to reconsider these proposed changes and leave the current regulations in place unless and until there is clear Rhode Island specific evidence showing that additional restrictions are truly necessary. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

D. Kalb calls on Phil Goss:

I am Phil Goss president of the United States Association of Reptile Keepers otherwise known as USARK here on behalf of our members in Rhode Island. USARK is a 501(c)(6) federal nonprofit so we have members in every state and in the United States we even have international members and I speak in issue such as this and have been doing it since 2013 so in honesty I actually appreciate the drive here so. I'm from rural Indiana so I'm happy to see something like this rather than going to the state house to have a meeting like this. So, if you're not that familiar with tegus the ones that are listed to be banned and which USARK opposes the required permit, the closest established invasive population of these is over 1300 miles away. It's nowhere close to Rhode Island there are several southeast states who have regulated or restricted these species, but they are only breeding in south central and southern Florida. They have found quite a few in Georgia, but they haven't found any hatchlings or babies in Georgia so they're not actually truly invasive in Georgia yet until obviously they're reproducing and hatching in that state. So southern Georgia's about, I don't know, 1100 miles away then you go and add a couple hundred miles from where there's actually feral populations of tegus in the United States. So again about 1300 miles away and clearly, they cannot survive anything close to this climate. I've heard reports with other state agencies that they're listed as invasive in South Carolina and that's not true as of about a year ago. it's kind of the same situation with Georgia. They found I think about

13 the last time I checked. But again, there were adults that we think we know where they came unfortunately from one irresponsible keeper and they're not breeding and they're not hatching out in South Carolina so again they're not actually invasive there. And most of the states except for Florida and Arkansas actually only ban one species so you got several species that are proposed for this permit. Most of the ones again except for those two states that I mentioned only regulate or restrict *Salvator merianae* which is the Argentine black and white tegu and also includes the blue tegu which is a subspecies of the Argentine black and white tegu it doesn't include the red tegus or the other species that are listed on your proposed permit. And if you do go forward with the permit requirement, you know the fees pretty negligible it's only a 5 dollar fee for the permit but the issue you're going to have with getting people to sign up for that permit is page 2 of your permit process it's pretty onerous it's pretty burdensome on people and it's especially not fair for people who already have those animals so that it forces them to jump through all those hoops for animals that they're already keeping responsibly is really unfair if you do go forward with the permit system all of that page 2 and those requirements should only apply to new owners and shouldn't apply to anybody who currently has the animals cause again that's really unfair to ask them to do all that stuff after they've maybe already had the animal for 5 10 or even 15 years because in captivity these lizards can live 20-30 years. and I'll be more than happy to answer any questions. I'm pretty well versed on tegu regulations and those southeastern states. I know you're not; you don't have to engage here but I can answer questions to the best of my ability if you have any questions for me.

D. Kalb calls on Emily Arpin:

Hi, my name's Emily Arpin and I'm with ET Reptiles and I'm both a responsible reptile keeper and small reptile business owner in Rhode Island. I strongly oppose the tegu permit system because we do not believe it reflects realities of our state climate or the responsible reptile community that is based here. Tegus are being portrayed as a major ecological threat however Rhode Island is simply not a suitable environment for them to establish a population or have an opportunity to make server impacts on our local wildlife or native plants. The assumption that is being implied in the discussions around tegus appears to be overstated when considering both their actual dietary intake and environmental restrictions. Our winters are truly harsh, and these animals are not capable of surviving long term outdoors in our climate. Frankie, who is the carrier over there which many know as the blizzard lizard was found in January under 220 inches of snow and while her story is miraculous it was only made possible after many dedicated hours days and weeks of caring for her frostbite, assisting feeding and multiple surgeries, our veterinaries, involved, had to reference human frostbite case studies because this level of frostbite injury had not been documented in a reptile case that they could compare it to. They either suffer from life threatening injuries at these temperatures or die from expose, responsible keepers are the people most likely to comply with permits while irresponsible keepers and animal dumpers usually ignore laws entirely. Transparency becomes at risk for fewer finds or confiscation by being kept honest about the animals they keep. Preventing them from seeking husbandry advice, veterinary care, or help when needed. We're concerned that permitting these animals will drive out the very community that funds grants use and educate the public. Ethical breeders produce wild caught demand through captive breeding and supplying. reptile shops and breeders prioritize screening their customers through education, secure housing, and proper animal care. We respectfully urge the state to work with experienced keepers and businesses on a

reasonable science-based solution rather than regulations that could unintentionally harm responsible owners and small local businesses. Laws and regulations should punish neglect abandonment and unsafe housing directly. Not create barriers for responsible reptile owners. Thank you.

D. Kalb calls on Taylor Faria:

Good evening and thank you for your time. My names Taylor Faria. I'm a reptile keeper and business owner and I own, co-own a reptile shop with Emily, and I'm here to oppose the proposal because the permitting process is unnecessarily complicated and will negatively affect responsible reptile owners, educators, and small businesses across Rhode Island. Many reptiles, including tegus, are used for educational programs that teach children and public about animal care, conservation, and responsible ownership. These animals help replace fear with understanding and responsible keepers play an important role in that education. The problem with these overly restrictive permitting processes is that it discourages responsible people from participating in the system at all. When permits become too expensive, which I know they're not in Rhode Island, but they are confusing and difficult to maintain people stop reaching out for guidance, they stop reaching out for veterinarian support and they stop coming to us for husbandry advice because they fear penalties or losing their animals. This creates the exact opposite of what these regulations are supposed to accomplish. It pushes ownership underground instead of encouraging responsible transparent care. Small businesses, breeders, and educators will be hurt by the paperwork that delays and the uncertainty that these regulations create. responsible reptile keepers are not against regulation. We support practical standards for safe housing and responsible ownership, but this proposal creates barriers that many ordinarily people and small business realistically cannot keep up with. I ask that your reconsider your restrictions and focus on a practical, workable regulation that encourages education, cooperation, and responsible care instead of pushing people away from the system. Thank you.

D. Kalb asks for any other comments, and Nelson Horton raises his hand:

Nelson: Actually, I have a question if I may. I was with Kimberly, I was running late from work, so she actually read my prepared statement. I was just wondering if as somebody who lives in the state and has applied for the permits for other species, monitors in particular, the hoops were, I'm going to use the cliché, I had to jump through a lot of hoops only to be at the end denied anyway for reasons that they did not give. They just said no. Now I have had to give them proof of my enclosures, and I have basically zoo quality enclosure built in my basement ready for the animal I was trying to bring in. I had to keep the animal out of state even though I was purchasing it in state from a shop in the state. I had to move the animal out of state to get it vet checked from an out of state vet, to get it brought into the state to get it in state to get it in state vet checked and then keep it out of state until the permit process was done. It just seems like, and again these the people who have already spoken have said the same thing I'm saying, but from real life experience of trying to do this it's, it's over the top hard in Rhode Island to get a permit and I believe it was Scott Marshall was the person I had to deal with and I'm sorry what is your name sir?

D. Kalb: My name is David Kalb.

Nelson: You're the man I've been emailing, okay. I'm Nelson Portman. I'm with the New England Herpetological Society. We've been doing reptile education, grants, and processes like that for years and years and years. I'm just saying though from my personal experience it was very, very hard to try and get a permit and then only to be denied at the end for no real apparent reason. So if you're going to do this with tegus especially if there's not grandfathering in for the ones who are here now, how my question is basically say you find 50 tegus that come and apply for permits and you guys deny them and I say you guys but the state denies the permit process are you guys willing to or do you have the facility to house 50 tegus or are you just going to plan on euthanize tegus if they don't get the permit process and can't be relocated quickly enough or what if an existing keeper has the tegu, applies to the permit, sorry let me go back, if the existing keeper doesn't know about the permit process yet they haven't heard about any of this and for some reason police come to their house find a tegu is the tegu going to be confiscated instantly or are they going to be given the chance to apply for a permit these are just questions I don't know the answers to yet, and I feel like it's for lack of a better term it's kind of a knee jerk reaction to a single incident of whether it be a released or escaped tegu that's causing this and I just I don't want to see us go so far so fast that we lose the ability to keep an animal or another animal with the permit process that's just so hard to do in this state is basically where I'm coming from so that's all I really got to say.

D. Kalb: Thank you.

Nelson: The questions I was wondering if you know we had it or if you had gone down the road far enough to have the answer to that.

D. Kalb: Since you missed it, there's actually not going to be any dialogue for tonight, it's not part of this process I'm just going to say thank you for your comment.

Oral portion of the 2026-27 Importation and Possession of Wild Animals closed at 6:05 PM.

DK states we will now enumerate all exhibits and receive comments for the public record.

Exhibit 1: the "Affidavit of Posting" of the public notice of this hearing a public notice of this hearing was posted on the Secretary of State and DEM computer websites on April 13th, 2026.

Exhibit 2: a copy of the draft regulation.

Exhibit 3: Kimberly Alpert public comment

Exhibit 4: Phil Goss public comment

Exhibit 5: Emily Arpin public comment

Exhibit 6: Taylor Faria public comment

Exhibit 7: Nelson Horton public comment

On behalf of the Department of Environmental Management and the Division of Fish & Wildlife, I would like to thank you for attending and for your comments. Since there are no further statements to be presented at this time, and since all interested parties present have been heard, I declare this public hearing is closed.

Public Hearing closed at 6:05 PM.

Transcribed by Melissa Curry.