# Why it pays to follow Australian biosecurity import conditions

In February 2023, a Siberian cat imported from Eastern Europe by Australian stud breeders, arrived at the Post Entry Quarantine Centre (PEQ) in Mickleham, Victoria. Close to the end of his importation journey, all that was required was for the cat to complete his mandatory 30-day quarantine period and be united with his owners.

Unfortunately, biosecurity officers discovered that the animal’s health certification was not authentic; this was confirmed by overseas authorities.

The fraudulence related to the cat’s rabies preparation. Due to the serious biosecurity risk the cat posed and the inability to test for rabies in a live animal, the department directed the owners to export the cat from Australia.

Many countries are reporting cases of fraudulent certification for cat and dog imports. Australia has not been spared from exposure to fraudulent activity with biosecurity officers from PEQ detecting pets without microchips, no proof of rabies vaccinations, false laboratory reports and fake vaccination certificates.

The case of the Siberian cat strongly demonstrates why those importing companion animals need to understand and follow Australia’s strict import conditions.

Re-exporting the cat was a significant expense for the owners. If employing an import agent on your behalf, be aware that biosecurity requirements still apply and that there is no getting around them, no matter what promises an agent may make.

Fortunately for the cat, his story had a happy ending. After many months and a return to Europe he has now been correctly vaccinated and tested in accordance with Australia’s requirements and granted an import permit.

The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) is the federal government body that manages the biosecurity risks associated with the importation of animals to keep Australia disease and pest free.

One of the most devasting, high-risk diseases is rabies. Australia is currently free of rabies, with the last suspected case reported in 1867.

However, with companion animal imports to Australia increasing, and domestic law changes impacting how pets are sourced and sold internationally; the risk of an incursion has grown.

Rabies is a zoonotic (meaning it can spread from animals to humans) viral disease resulting in about 60,000 human deaths a year.

It causes tens of thousands of animal fatalities, 95% of which occur in Africa and Asia. Dogs are responsible for its transmission to humans in over 96% of cases. But cats can also carry the deadly disease.

Africa has the highest per capita rabies death rate. There were two rabies outbreaks in South Africa in 2008 and 2010. Several hundred dogs were infected and two people died. Both outbreaks were only controlled when a free, mass vaccination of the nation’s dogs was undertaken.

In Asia, rabies is not a notifiable disease and remains uncontrolled in many countries.

Most outbreaks occur in India and Bangladesh, although Indonesia, Cambodia, China, Lao, Malaysia, Mongolia, the Philippines and Vietnam are considered high-risk nations. In Taiwan, rabies is endemic in its wildlife.

Rabies is a particularly cruel and distressing disease.

Symptoms in animals range from cerebral (brain) dysfunction, cranial nerve dysfunction, ataxia (lack of coordination), weakness, paralysis, seizures, difficulty breathing, difficulty swallowing, excessive salivation, abnormal behaviour, aggression and self-mutilation.

The commercialisation of the companion animal trade, and increasing import non-compliance, are upping Australia’s risk of a rabies incursion.

In March this year, DAFF responded to this increased rabies threat by strengthening biosecurity measures to reduce the risks associated with dog and cat imports.

New measures include stricter requirements around residency in approved countries and an official government veterinarian verifying the identity of animals before they undergo export preparation.

Where the animal’s identification has not been officially verified, PEQ duration has been extended from 10 to 30 days. The 30-day period is consistent with recent international experience, where imported animals that developed signs of rabies generally did so within 30 days of import. Animals with their identity officially verified will continue to undergo 10 days quarantine.

The extension in PEQ duration for a proportion of improved animals has led to an increased wait-time for importers to secure a booking at the Mickleham facility. We’re encouraging importers to plan imports of cats and dogs well in advance to try to secure your preferred PEQ booking window.

The full range of reasons why import conditions have been strengthened are outlined in DAFF’s report: [Review of rabies virus risk in imported dogs, cats and canine semen from approved countries](https://www.agriculture.gov.au/biosecurity-trade/policy/risk-analysis/animal/dogs_and_cats).

“The message from DAFF is clear: import conditions are strict for a reason. If you see agencies offering fast-track import offers that sound too good to be true, then they probably are,” said Dr Amy Little of DAFF’s Animal & Biological Imports Office.

“Biosecurity is everybody’s responsibility. DAFF is seeking help from the public to report any activity they feel might be illegal and increases Australia’s rabies’ risk. You can report your suspicions anonymously via the [redline phone service](https://www.agriculture.gov.au/biosecurity-trade/policy/legislation/compliance/redline).

“In 2022, DAFF issued nearly 10,000 import permits for dogs and cats. Because most rabies risk management happens offshore, the department relies on animal owners, importers and agents doing the right thing and fraudulent documentation poses a huge risk to Australia’s rabies free status.

“There is no testing available that can be conducted on a live animal to tell us if that animal is free from rabies,” Dr Little said.

“So if an animal arrives in Australia and has not been properly prepared to meet rabies import conditions, DAFF has no option but to direct that animal to be exported or euthanised.

“The risk of that animal having rabies is too high. Australia’s human and animal populations must be protected.

“Re-exporting and denying entry to animals is distressing both for the owner and biosecurity staff and a situation DAFF hopes to avoid by raising compliance awareness among potential importers,” she added.

Australia only allows the importation of dogs and cats from approved countries. Import conditions vary according to an exporting country’s level of exposure to rabies.

Nations are grouped according to their risk levels and referred to as group 1, 2 and 3 countries. A list of approved countries is available on page 22 of [the report](https://www.agriculture.gov.au/biosecurity-trade/policy/risk-analysis/animal/dogs_and_cats).

If you’re wanting to import a cat from an approved country, you can find step-by-step how-to guides on [DAFF’s website](https://www.agriculture.gov.au/biosecurity-trade/cats-dogs/step-by-step-guides/category2-step-by-step-guide-for-cats).

If you do not meet the conditions, your animal will be denied entry to Australia. So do the right thing and ensure your animal is brought home safely, the right way.