

EVIDENCE SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

US Fish and Wildlife Service
National Fish and Wildlife Forensic Laboratory
1490 East Main Street
Ashland, OR 97520

Introduction

The Mission of the National Fish and Wildlife Forensics Laboratory (Laboratory) is to provide forensic support in wildlife investigations.

The purpose of this guide is to help you with proper documentation, packaging and shipping procedures so that your evidence shipment meets:

- 1) U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) regulations
- 2) Laboratory requirements for analysis
- 3) Requirements for presentation in courts of law

Good Communication

Call the Laboratory if you have any additional questions about how to best ship your evidence to the Lab. We are here to serve your needs.

Contact us at: National Fish and Wildlife Forensics Laboratory
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 Ashland, OR 97520
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SECTION		PAGE
1	Safety	3
2	Preparing for Court	3
3	Packaging Materials	5
4	Documents Used in Submitting Evidence	7
5	General Evidence Packaging Guidelines	8
6	Packaging and Shipping Animal Carcasses	9
7	Evidence for DNA Analysis	12
8	Packaging and Shipping Bird Evidence for Identification	14
9	Packaging and Shipping Firearms Evidence	15
10	Digital Imagery	17
11	Packaging and Shipping Potentially Hazardous Evidence	18

1. Safety

Keeping yourself, your co-workers, family, and everyone who comes into contact with the evidence safe during collection, packaging, shipping and receipt by the Laboratory should always be on your mind. Using proper Personal Protective Equipment where needed, and using good collection, packaging, cleanup, transport and storage methods will minimize the possibility that someone becomes sick or is injured.

NOTE: NO ODORS OR LEAKS!! There must be NO odors emanating from, or fluids leaking out of packages at any time during shipping. Where necessary, use odor control kits (provided by the Lab) and, where necessary, at least 3 layers of heavy plastic packaging, OR MORE, to prevent leaks.

2. Preparing for Court

The mindset before handling any evidence in an investigation should be that it will show up in court and be questioned. How each item of evidence is documented, collected, packaged, sealed, labeled, tagged, preserved and shipped is vital to maintaining its usefulness in the investigation.

The goal of good evidence handling is to preserve the physical, chemical, biochemical and legal integrity of the evidence so that ...

- The integrity of the evidence, and its value for forensic analysis, does not change.
- The chain of custody lists who has handled the evidence from the time it was collected at the crime scene through its appearance in court.
- The evidence is packaged and labeled in such a way as to keep everyone safe throughout the handling and shipping process.

When the evidence arrives at the Laboratory for analysis:

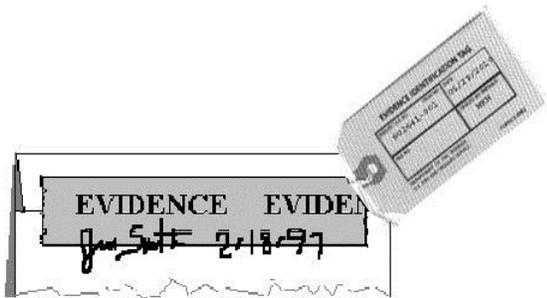
- All tags, chains, and documents should be properly and legibly filled out with no erroneous information.
- All evidence is accounted for – submission documents and the chains of custody correspond to all items that were shipped.
- All evidence is properly sealed with sealing tape, initials and date.
- All packaging is intact (i.e. no tears or holes in packages that can result in leaking, cross contamination or loss of evidence).
- All fragile evidence has been wrapped to prevent breakage.
- There are no noxious odors escaping from packages.
- All digital evidence has been packaged to preserve the data.

- All hazardous evidence has been packaged following the USDOT regulations so that there is no illness, injury or death to anyone handling the package.

Notes on Sealing and Tagging Evidence -- All evidence sent to the Laboratory must be properly sealed in a container so that the contents cannot be switched, altered, contaminated or damaged without detection. The seal includes taping all container openings with “evidence tape” and placing your initials and the date across the margin of the tape and the container.

Preserving Seals An important aspect of sealing evidence is to preserve, where possible, each seal that has been placed on the evidence packaging. A sealed package should be opened in another location to preserve the original seal. Each subsequent opening should be in a new location. Each person who opens the package will be the same person resealing the package unless they have transferred that requirement to someone else as recorded on the chain of custody.

All Seizure and Evidence tags should be attached to the outside of each sealed package- not inside a sealed package and comingling with the evidence.



- Package is sealed with Evidence Tape.
- Your initials and date across tape margin.
- Completed tag attached to outside.

Notes on Chain of Custody-- One of the most important documents for the courtroom presentation of evidence is a complete chain of custody. The chain of custody, either represented as a Seizure Tag attached to the evidence, or on a Chain of Custody Form which follows the evidence, is used to document chronologically all individuals, by their signature and date, who have had the evidence in their possession since it was first collected.

3. Packaging Materials

Maintaining the integrity of your evidence starts with using new containers that are sturdy enough to withstand shipping.

Primary Containers (containers that the evidence is placed into first) should be new, clean, unused and undamaged boxes, bags, plastic bottles, metal containers, etc., that can completely contain the evidence and allow for proper sealing. Of course, hard-shelled plastic or metal gun cases don't have to be new, but all hinges and closure hasps need to function properly. Primary containers must remain intact and not allow leaking of the contents.

Outer Containers (containers to which shipping labels are affixed) can also be either new or used sturdy and intact cardboard, plastic or metal, but still must be clean and undamaged. Coolers used in shipping perishable evidence, carcasses, etc., must be undamaged with all hinges and closure hasps functioning properly. There must be NO written indication on the outer container that it contains evidence.

DO NOT use Styrofoam as a primary, secondary or outer container as they always break open during shipping.

Bubble Wrap and Padding should be used for fragile evidence to protect from breakage. Padding should also be used on evidence with sharp edges, points or blades such as arrowheads and knives, or sharp claws, talons, teeth, splintered bones or any other item which can cause injury when handled.

Freezer Pack Ice or Blue Ice can be new or used (but clean) and of adequate quantity to assist in preserving perishable evidence. Do not use bottled water or refillable freezer packs.

Laboratory-Supplied Evidence Collection Kits and Shipping Containers

The Laboratory will supply some packaging materials and instructions in the form of kits for certain types of evidence. These include:

- Odor-Control Packaging - U.S. DOT requires that packages being shipped exhibit NO noxious odors. The Laboratory has assembled an Odor Control Kit for shipping decomposed carcasses to the Lab. The kits come in 2 sizes – for large animals and for small animals – and are available on request.
- Pesticide Collection Kit - This kit must be used to meet USDOT requirements to ship pesticides.

- Containment Packaging for Potentially Infected Evidence - This kit must be used to meet USDOT requirements to ship items which may be infected with disease, including but not limited to bush meat, primate, civet and bat parts/carcasses.
- Evidence Collection Kits for DNA Analysis - The Genetics Section has collection kits available for use in collecting and shipping various tissues samples.

Call the Lab to obtain these packaging materials for these evidence types.

4. Documents Used in Submitting Evidence

Three documents are required in each submission of evidence to the Laboratory:

- Evidence Tags.
- Evidence Submittal Form.
- Chain of Custody.

Evidence Tags All evidence items need to be tagged with a completed white *Evidence Seizure Tag* ([Form 3-487](#)) or a blue *Evidence Identification Tag* ([Form 3-2052](#)).

Evidence Submittal Form ([Form 3-2053](#)) The Lab's Evidence Submittal Form identifies important information about your submission. A fillable PDF version of the form is available. A long, multi-item form is available by request.

The submittal form should be filled out as completely as possible. The following information is required:

- Your case number.
- The name of the investigator requesting analysis.
- Your return address and phone number.
- An item-for-item list of the evidence being sent for examination.
- An item-for-item examination request.
- Special instructions regarding handling, return or forwarding of evidence.

Chain-of-Custody Form ([Form 3-2063](#)) A completed chain of custody is required for all evidence items submitted to the Laboratory. The white Evidence Seizure Tag can serve as a Chain of Custody for submitting evidence to the Laboratory but it is preferred that the 8.5 x 11 *Chain of Custody Form* ([Form 3-2063](#)) be used. A fillable PDF version of the form is available.

No Transcription Errors From time to time the Laboratory receives evidence where the Item numbers and Seizure Tag numbers are not correctly transcribed between Evidence Tags, the Chain of Custody and the Evidence Submittal Form. Care must be taken to ensure that there are no transcription errors which could cause doubt in the paperwork.

5. General Evidence Packaging Guidelines

The following guidance outlines the general steps taken to document, package, and ship evidence to the Laboratory. See the specific requirement sections for guidance on unique evidence types.

1. Package each item of evidence in primary containers (bags, boxes, etc.).
2. Seal the evidence.
3. Attach completed and uniquely numbered Seizure Tags / Evidence Tags to each item.
4. Fill out the Evidence Submittal Form and *signed* Chain of Custody Form and place it along with any other paperwork in an envelope.
5. Place the sealed evidence and envelope into an UNMARKED shipping container.
6. Draw a circled letter 'E' on the outside of each shipping package to alert the Laboratory that this parcel contains evidence. Do not affix evidence tape to the outer container.
7. If the package contains an animal carcass which is not suspected or known to be infected with disease, a label stating "Exempt Animal Carcass" is to be placed on the package.
8. Address all evidence shipping packages to:

ATTENTION: EVIDENCE UNIT
USFWS/LE FORENSICS LABORATORY
1490 EAST MAIN STREET
ASHLAND, OR 97520

9. Ship via US Postal or with commercial carrier using traceable methods. For perishable evidence (carcasses and tissue samples), ship overnight on Mondays or Tuesdays so that the package arrives during the work week.

Note: all potentially dangerous evidence, i.e. sharp objects such as knives, talons, beaks, broken/jagged bones, ivory, etc., need to be secured and packaged in a way to protect anyone removing the items.

A Note on Shipping Multiple Packages: If your evidence submission consists of more than one package, please mark the outside of each packages 1 of 3, 2 of 3, 3 of 3, etc., and place a copy of the Submittal Form and Chain of Custody in each package.

6. Packaging and Shipping Animal Carcasses

Carcasses require special packaging and labeling for shipment.

***** ALWAYS WEAR PROPER PERSONAL PROTECTION FOR SAFETY *****

NOTE: NO ODORS OR LEAKS!! There must be NO odors emanating from, or fluids leaking out of packages at any time during shipping. Where necessary, use odor control kits (provided by the Lab) and, where necessary, at least 3 layers of heavy plastic packaging, OR MORE, to prevent leaks.

Call the Pathology Section of the Laboratory and discuss your submission if you have carcass evidence of the following types:

- Carcasses that are suspected or known to be infected with disease.
- Carcasses which were used as pesticide baits.
- Significant number of carcasses (20 or more).

Do I ship the carcass refrigerated or frozen?

More complete cause of death information can be obtained from *fresh carcasses* if they have never been frozen. Freezing can break down cell walls and damage tissues, so it's important, whenever possible, to *ice down and refrigerate* a fresh carcass and ship it to the Lab within 48 hours.

---- **FOR FRESH CARCASSES:** If the carcass is fresh, refrigerate the carcass - do not freeze it.

Immediately:

1. Triple bag the carcass in heavy plastic bags. (Use additional packaging to contain leaks). Place an evidence seal with your initials and date of sealing on the outer bag, and attach your Seizure Tag or Evidence Tag.
2. Place the carcass in a plastic or metal, insulated shipping container and chill it with a lot of blue ice.
3. Ship to the Lab within 48 hours of collection.

Also: write on the Evidence Submittal Form that carcass is Fresh-never-Frozen and call the Lab to discuss shipment and receipt.

NOTE: If you cannot ship the carcass to the Lab within 48 hours, freeze it down and note on the Submittal Form that it has been Frozen.

---- **FOR DECOMPOSED CARCASSES:** If the carcass is decomposed (masses of fly larvae; absence of flesh), use an Odor Control Kit (page 11) and freeze the carcass prior to shipping to the Lab.

Additional Considerations when Shipping Carcasses

Trace Evidence on the Carcass Carcasses may also have trace evidence fibers found in the hair coat of mammals or the plumage of birds which may help point to individuals that came into contact with that animal before the agent arrived on the scene. In order to preserve fibers on the body, the animal should be carefully placed in the plastic bag before removal from the crime scene and should stay in that bag through the remainder of the packaging and shipping process.

Pesticide-Laced Bait Carcasses Carcasses used as bait that are laced with pesticides cannot be shipped to the Lab. Suspected pesticides on the carcass should be collected following the guidance under the Pesticides, Poisons and Other Chemicals section below.

Oiled birds If the oiled bird carcasses are in good enough condition to be examined for cause of death, the following packaging should be used in order to preserve the volatile chemicals within the feathers so that further testing can be performed.

Instructions:

- Oiled birds should be wrapped completely in aluminum foil.
- The foil-wrapped birds should then be placed into an Odor Control kit for shipping.

If the carcasses are in poor condition and submitted for species identification only, then follow the Odor Control kit packaging guidelines. Do not use aluminum foil.

Padding Sharp Edges To prevent tearing of evidence bags leading to cross contamination of samples and possible injury to evidence handlers, use padding, such as paper towels secured with rubber bands to cover beaks, talons, claws, teeth, broken bones, etc., of carcasses, especially where pesticide death is suspected.

Hard-Shelled Insulated Coolers The outer package must be a clean, undamaged, hard-shelled insulated cooler (plastic or metal) with working hinges.

“Exempt Animal Specimen” Labeling Packages with carcasses need to be labeled with an “Exempt Animal Specimen” label for shipping.

Whenever possible, Ship Overnight on Monday-Thursday To be sure packages arrive during work days. Do not ship on Friday.

Leaks and Odors To meet U.S. DOT requirements for shipping, it is essential that packages DO NOT have any leaks or odors. Call the Lab to obtain odor-control packaging.

Using the Odor Control Kit for Decomposed Carcasses

U.S. DOT requires that packages being shipped exhibit NO noxious odors. The Laboratory has assembled an Odor Control Kit for shipping decomposed carcasses to the Lab. The kits come in 2 sizes – for large animals and for small animals – and are available on request.

These kits include:

- Saranex odor barrier bag
- Heavy-duty plastic bag
- Odor-absorbing carbon cloth bag
- Vinyl body bag
- Roll of duct tape and zip ties
- Two pairs of gloves
- “Exempt Animal Specimen” shipping label

Odor Packaging Instructions:

1. Carefully wrap all sharp body parts such as talons, beaks, broken bones, etc. with paper towels, and secure with rubber bands to protect against damage to packaging materials and injury to evidence handlers.
2. Place carcass into the Saranex bag, void any air pockets and zip-tie the end.
3. Place this into the heavy duty plastic bag, wrap with duct tape to remove air pockets, and zip-tie the end.
4. Place an Evidence Seal with initial and date on the plastic bag, and attach the completed Seizure tag or Blue Evidence Tag.
5. Place carcass into the black carbon bag and zip-tie the end.
6. Place this into the vinyl body bag and then into a cooler with blue ice.

7. Evidence for DNA Analysis

Samples for DNA analysis may be obtained from a variety of sources – including fresh tissue, freezer meat, gut piles, blood (fresh or dried), feathers, bone, antler, horn, hair, cooked, canned or smoked meats, fresh tissue, and sometimes tissue or body fluids deposited on objects.....but it is the quality and quantity of DNA that will determine the success of the analysis.

***** ALWAYS WEAR PERSONAL PROTECTION FOR SAFETY *****

NOTE: NO ODORS OR LEAKS!! There must be NO odors emanating from, or fluids leaking out of packages at any time during shipping. Where necessary, use odor control kits (provided by the Lab) and, where necessary, at least 3 layers of heavy plastic packaging, OR MORE, to prevent leaks.

DNA Evidence is Fragile Exposure to moisture and exposure to sunlight (UV radiation) are the two primary conditions that lead to rapid degradation of DNA. Keeping that in mind, you will want to collect samples for analysis that will maximize your chance of obtaining the best information. Two things to remember are:

1A. **If it's wet – freeze it.**

Collection and storage of fresh/ wet tissue or blood

If you are sampling from a fresh carcass or gut pile, muscle tissue or organ tissue are the best sources for DNA. Package the sample in a plastic bag and freeze as soon as possible. Be sure to wrap perishable tissues in multiple bags to prevent leaking and cross-contamination. If it is not possible to freeze the sample, at least keep it cold, or use beaded desiccant. Desiccant sampling kits and instructions are available from the Lab.

If the material to be sampled is decomposed or degraded, but under moist conditions, store the sample in a plastic container or bag and freeze as soon as possible. Beaded desiccant is not optimal for degraded or compromised tissues.

Wet blood samples may be collected by swabbing the sample with a cotton swab or gauze pad. Do not use paper or woven cloth because the blood sample will disperse and it will be more difficult to obtain good quality DNA. Collect samples to minimize the chance of having the blood of more than one animal present on the swab or gauze. Do not use beaded desiccant for wet blood.

1B. **If it's dry – keep it dry.**

Collection and storage of dried tissue or blood

Dry blood samples are best kept dry – scrapings of the blood may be collected in paper, or the object with the dried blood may be submitted whole to the lab (when practical or if it is of manageable size). If the dried blood cannot be sampled dry, use a cotton swab or gauze pad wetted with clean water (not saliva or pond/lake water), and collect a concentrated spot of the blood sample.

Dried material such as dried tissue, bones, feathers, etc. should be kept dry and stored in paper containers.

8. Packaging and Shipping Bird Evidence for Identification

If the whole bird is available, ALWAYS SEND THE WHOLE BIRD. If a partial carcass (dry or wet) is available, SEND ALL OF THE AVAILABLE MATERIAL. The examiner will remove diagnostic feathers or parts, prepare them for identification, and return them with the remaining portions of your evidence.

Dry, non-perishable material: Follow the *General Guide to Packaging and Shipping Evidence*

Frozen material --- Review the specific points regarding shipping Animal Carcasses.

Oiled birds If the oiled bird carcasses are being submitted for species ID only, and not cause of death, follow the Odor Control kit packaging guidelines. Do not use aluminum foil. Packaging for cause of death analysis is outlined on page 10.

Art-work: Wrap flat items (fans, medicine wheels) in a plastic bag, tissue or other non-inked paper, and place in a box layered between styrofoam or foam peanuts. Large, flat crafted items should be placed on a sheet of cardboard and wrapped with plastic film. Items such as Kachina dolls should be cushioned in styrofoam or foam peanuts inside a sturdy box.

Single or loose feathers: Pack each item to be identified in labeled plastic bags. Take care that feathers will not be bent during packaging or shipping. If possible, mixed loose feathers should be sorted and packaged by type.

Down/trace evidence: Send the entire 'host' item (trap, stick, etc) or relevant part bearing the trace material to the Laboratory as a packaged evidence item. The examiner will examine the host item and remove the relevant material. NEVER collect or package trace feather evidence on adhesive tape.

9. Packaging and Shipping Firearms Evidence

NO LOADED FIREARMS UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES MAY LOADED FIREARMS BE SHIPPED TO THE LABORATORY! THIS MEANS BOTH THE CHAMBER AND MAGAZINE NEED TO BE CHECKED.

Note: be aware that ammunition in tubular magazines on some rifles and shotguns may hang up in the tube.

BLACKPOWDER FIREARMS ALWAYS CALL THE LAB BEFORE SUBMITTING BLACKPOWDER FIREARMS.

SUBMIT DETACHABLE MAGAZINES WITH THE FIREARMS Test fires without the magazines are not the same as with the magazines in place.

LEAVE THE BOLTS IN BOLT ACTION RIFLES If the bolt is put into the rifle case separately it can move around in transit and damage the stock or scope.

FIREARM FUNCTION AND SAFETY If you have any concerns about the function/safety of a firearm, be sure to call the Firearms Examiner and state those concerns on your Evidence Submittal Form.

Collection Instructions:

- DO NOT ETCH OR CARVE YOUR INITIALS OR THE CASE NUMBER INTO THE STOCKS OR METAL OF FIREARMS. Record the serial number onto the Seizure Tag, Chain of Custody, and the Evidence Submittal Form.
- The firearm should be minimally handled to avoid loss or destruction of evidence. Do not allow objects to enter or contact the firearm's barrel, chamber or other operating surface.
- DO NOT TIE EVIDENCE TAGS AND SEIZURE TAGS THROUGH THE TRIGGER GUARD. The wire or string tags could cause a safety hazard and have to be removed before test-firing.
- It is recommended that investigators purchase a sturdy, cushioned-lined, hard plastic or metal gun case for shipping firearms. A locking case is preferred. **Ship the key separately.** Securely tape all clasps with packing tape to prevent accidental opening in transit. Do Not use a cardboard or styrofoam shipping box.
- Keep firearms at room temperature in dry conditions unless a firearm is recovered from water. Call the Firearms Examiner for specific instructions regarding firearms recovered from water.

Expended Projectiles and Cartridge Cases

Test Fired Cartridges DO NOT PERSONALLY TEST FIRE A FIREARM AND COLLECT CARTRIDGE CASES, SHOT SHELLS, OR BULLETS FOR COMPARISON PURPOSES. The Firearms Examiner will test fire all firearms. Some firearms may be unsafe to fire with modern ammunition and some ammunition is not suitable for comparisons. The laboratory will supply the test fire ammunition.

Protecting the Evidence

- DO NOT USE PLIERS, FORCEPS, KNIVES, OR SCREWDRIVERS TO REMOVE BULLETS. Rifling marks on bullets are easily damaged by contact with tools.
- DO NOT MARK CARTRIDGE CASES OR BULLETS. Mark the outside of the envelope with the description and initials.
- DO NOT SEND WET OR DAMP CARTRIDGE CASES, SHOT SHELLS, OR EXPENDED BULLETS. If these items are recovered wet or damp, allow them to dry before packaging. A water wash (no rubbing or scrubbing!) to remove excess organic material is encouraged unless genetic examinations are to be performed on the organic material. In that case, allow the blood or tissue to air-dry and then package the items in paper wrap, not plastic, and ship following the general package/shipping guidelines. Be sure to indicate if the firearms evidence has blood/tissue that require additional examination.

Package dry cartridge cases, shot shells, and expended bullets individually in paper envelopes. Wrap them in tissue or paper towels first to keep them secure. Do not use plastic bags or other containers which may permit the growth of bacteria or rust which is potentially harmful to microscopic marks on ammunition components.

Individually wrap or otherwise protect all cases, shells and discharged bullets to prevent rubbing and abrasion during transit. The outer shipping container must be strong enough to prevent compression damage to all items in transit.

Live Ammunition

CONTACT THE FIREARMS UNIT IF YOU HAVE LIVE AMMUNITION YOU WANT TO SUBMIT.

Due to changes in USDOT regulations, live ammunition can only be shipped via ground.

10. Digital Imagery

Digital Imagery evidence includes images on cameras, CDs, DVDs, SD cards, thumb drives, or other digital media or equipment which needs to be handled and packaged in a way to protect it from damage and alteration. The following guidelines should be followed when storing or packaging digital imagery evidence.

General Guidelines:

- Store the evidence in a cool dry area.
- Keep the evidence away from magnets and devices that emit magnetic fields, as these can alter data.
- When re-packaging any evidence, retain all materials and seals for court.
- When dealing with devices impacted by moisture and static buildup avoid plastic bags. Antistatic bags, paper bags, and cardboard boxes are the preferred sealing containers for this type of evidence. (Aluminum foil, empty brand new paint cans with lids)

Regarding Media Cards/Thumb Drives:

- A paper envelope works well for these devices. Antistatic bag with desiccant can also be used.

Regarding CDs/DVDs:

- Place in sleeves to protect the recorded surface and pad them to prevent breakage.
- A 6" x 6" piece of heavy cardboard or foam board may be used.
- Rigid CD cases and cardboard sleeves can also be used.

Regarding Digital Cameras:

- Provide adequate padding to protect these devices during shipping.
- At least 2" of bubble wrap on all sides should be provided.
- Fit snugly into shipping box.

Regarding Lithium Batteries in Camera Equipment:

- USDOT Regulations require that lithium batteries remain in the camera. Batteries that have been removed from these devices require specialized packaging.

11. Packaging and Shipping Potentially Hazardous Materials as Evidence

The U.S. Department of Transportation defines hazardous materials as a "...material that is capable of posing an unreasonable risk to health, safety, and property when transported in commerce..." (49 CFR Part 171.8)

Furthermore, USDOT requires that anyone who ships hazardous materials be trained and tested prior to shipping (49 CFR Part 172.704).

Evidence which falls into the definition of hazardous includes, but is not limited to:

Pesticides or poisons which are found on laced bait carcasses or seeds, in containers, etc. Other chemicals that are part of an investigation may also be hazardous and require special packaging.

Bush meat, whole carcasses or parts/pieces of primates, civets and bats that could be infected with disease. "Bush meat" consists of partial carcasses or carcass parts from foreign sources that have been partially cooked/smoked or are uncooked to be sold as food or talismans. Because bush meat items may be fresh or crudely dried as a means of preservation, the tissues may pose a potential biological hazard. This is especially true if there are indications that the tissues are of primate origin.

If confiscated packages are thought to contain this type of evidence, it is best to not open the package, or at least to avoid any contact with all tissues.

If you have any potentially hazardous evidence, call the Laboratory to discuss what you have and to arrange to receive packaging materials and instructions for your submission 541-482-4191.