

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

For Release October 12, 1979

Megan Durham 202/343-5634

INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN AMERICAN ALLIGATOR HIDES TO BE PERMITTED

International trade in American alligator hides and hide products will be permitted for the first time in a decade under new regulations announced today by Lynn A. Greenwalt, Director of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The new rules, which were published in the October 12, 1979, Federal Register, also authorize limited sales of meat from legally taken alligators. No interstate or foreign commerce in alligator meat will be permitted, however.

"This change in the rules governing international trade in alligator hides is possible today because of the success of Federal and State protection of the alligator," Greenwalt said.

"Although the alligator is still endangered in many parts of its range, in some areas alligator populations have increased substantially. Some of these animals may be legally harvested under our present laws. These new regulations will prevent the waste of valuable resources from legally taken alligators. We also hope that the availability of a reliable supply of legal alligator hides on the international market will result in less exploitation of other endangered crocodilians."

Greenwalt emphasized that although there are about 1 million alligators in the Southeast, the species is still protected under the Endangered Species Act. He said commerce in alligator hides, hide products, and meat would be strictly controlled to prevent illegally obtained alligator products from entering the market.

Under the rules, the only legal sources of alligator hides or meat are from alligators legally held in captivity, such as those raised on alligator farms; alligators killed by authorized State or Federal employees; or alligators killed in limited hunts which are permitted in parts of Louisiana.

The major significance of the rules is to extend the availability of legal alligator hides to foreign buyers, tanners, and fabricators. Domestic businesses already are allowed access to hides from legally killed alligators under a Federal permit system.

Foreign trade in alligator hides and hide products has been banned since 1969 under Federal law and by the listing of the alligator on Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). At the 1979 CITES meeting, the alligator was reclassified to Appendix II, which permits regulated international trade. The U.S. then changed its own

-more-

special rules governing alligators to permit limited international trade in alligator hides in accordance with CITES. This is accomplished in the present rulemaking.

The changes in the alligator regulations were first proposed by the Fish and Wildlife Service on October 2, 1978, and were subsequently re-proposed on July 18, 1979. The final regulations take into account public comments received on both proposals.

Under the new rules, international and domestic commerce in alligator hides and hide products will be controlled through a "closed system" designed to ensure that only legally taken hides enter the system and only products made from them leave it. Legally taken alligator hides must be tagged by the State where the taking occurs, and only tagged hides can be sold legally. Once the tags are attached, they must remain on the hides through the tanning process. After a product is completed, the fabricator must attach a special label provided by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Both foreign and domestic businesses must obtain Federal permits to buy, tan, or fabricate alligator hides. Permittees then are allowed to do business only with each other until the alligator product is completed and the Service's label is attached. Once labeled, the product can be sold to others outside the "closed system." Permittees must meet stringent record-keeping and reporting requirements, and may lose their Federal permit--and thus their access to legal alligator hides--if they violate the conditions of the permit.

Alligator meat sales may take place only within the State where the alligator was legally taken, and only if State laws and regulations allow such sales.

The alligator was first listed as an endangered species in 1966, when the species was declining rapidly because of habitat loss and commercial exploitation. It remains classified as endangered or threatened throughout its range, except in 12 parishes (counties) of Louisiana where alligators have been reclassified to a less restrictive listing which permits limited hunting.

Louisiana estimates that between 10,000 and 15,000 alligators will be taken during its 1979 hunt. Florida has a nuisance alligator control program, which provides between 1,600 and 2,000 hides a year. The number of hides produced by alligator farmers this year probably will not exceed 1,000. The domestic market for alligator leather presently is limited because a number of states have laws prohibiting the sale or use of alligator products.

x

x

x