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As a U.S. agency denies permits to import monkeys for research, industry starts pushing back



By [Ed Silverman](#) March 3, 2023



JEAN-FRANCOIS MONIER/AFP/Getty Images

In a little-noticed move, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently began denying company requests to import certain monkeys from Cambodia for use in early-stage drug research. Now, the pharmaceutical industry is trying to push back by lobbying Congress.

The National Association for Biomedical Research argues the situation is a “crisis,” with 60% of the supply of non-human

primates “critical” to early-stage research now out of reach. So the trade group, which advocates for using animals in pharmaceutical research, is organizing a letter-writing campaign to urge members of Congress to “quickly secure the U.S. supply chain” without interruption.

“This disruption will significantly slow the U.S. biopharmaceutical pipeline, stifle scientific advancement, impair research, halt industry-wide economic growth, and deprive patients of potentially life-saving treatments,” the [NABR letter](#) states. “The gravity of this situation cannot be understated.” Among those signing the letter are several contract research organizations and a trade group representing biotechs.

In recent weeks, the Fish and Wildlife Service quietly began denying applications to import long-tailed macaques in the wake of a federal government probe into a monkey-smuggling operation emanating from Cambodia. (See [here](#) and [here](#).) Last November, several people — including two Cambodian wildlife officials — were indicted by U.S. authorities for shipping the monkeys under false pretenses.

We asked the Fish & Wildlife Service for comment and will update you accordingly.

The monkeys, which are protected under international law, were allegedly obtained from national parks and protected areas in Cambodia, and then shipped with labels falsely identifying them as having been bred in captivity. Beyond any concerns that long-tailed macaques are endangered, using

monkeys bred in the wild would be problematic for researchers.

The distinction is important. Unlike those bred in captivity, long-tail macaques caught in the wild may harbor diseases and have compromised immune systems unbeknownst to researchers. This can affect the outcome of early-stage clinical research. Federal authorities are now searching for ways to determine which macaques already in the U.S. were bred in the wild or captivity.

A spokesperson for Charles River Laboratories, a major contract research firm, told us “we recently had a number of shipments of non-human primates from our Cambodian supplier denied clearance by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.” The company is waiting for the agency to “develop and implement new procedures to reinforce confidence that the (primates) we import from Cambodia are purpose-bred.”

For now, the company, which received a subpoena from the U.S. Department of Justice, has [suspended shipments](#). And in December, Inotiv, a major supplier of non-human primates to corporate, government, and academic research laboratories, [halted sales and deliveries](#) of the animals in its inventory until it is clear where the macaques were bred.

The quagmire has gotten attention on Wall Street, given the role these monkeys play in drug development. For now, uncertainty lingers until since the Fish & Wildlife Service and industry must agree upon a test to determine where monkeys are bred and Cambodia puts controls in place to ensure

exports are appropriate, according to Ashlyn Teel of Washington Analysis.

“It is unclear how long the supply chain will be strained, and without monkeys from Cambodia, there will not be enough for testing in the U.S., which is already facing a shortage,” she wrote investors. A law passed late last year allows companies “to pivot away from animal testing, (but) we believe this will take years to implement. In the near-to medium-term, primates will still be needed to bring drugs to market.”

Some animal-rights activists, meanwhile, suggested the Fish & Wildlife Service has gone further and is denying applications to import macaques from any country, not just Cambodia. That could not be confirmed. Nonetheless, the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals issued a statement saying “the experimentation industry (needs) to seize this extraordinary opportunity to retool and reimagine laboratory testing and put the U.S. on the vanguard of non-animal, human-relevant testing models.”

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