

## AVMA Policy on Ferrets Updated *AFA Committee Works for Rabies Label Change*

In response to a January 1998 letter sent by the AFA to Dr. John Freeman, president of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), requesting a review of the AVMA's current ferret policy, the AVMA responded saying that the AVMA's Council on Public Health and Regulatory Veterinary Medicine would review its policy and would "propose any appropriate review in the light of the new knowledge reflected in the Compendium of Animal Rabies Control, 1998."

The Council met in March 1998, and proposed the following deletions (shown by strikeouts) in its ferret policy:

The AVMA recognizes that ferrets (*Mustela putorius furo*) are being kept as pets and for research purposes. In those states or areas where ferret ownership is legal, the AVMA recommends:

1. Responsible ferret ownership: this includes knowledge pertaining to ferret husbandry (care, nutrition, housing, and species' habits). It is also recommended that no ferret be left unattended with any individual incapable of removing himself or herself from the ferret.

2. Proper veterinary care by a veterinarian legally authorized to practice veterinary medicine: this includes preventive medicine and, when needed, medical or surgical care, including spaying, castration, and descenting. Ferrets should be vaccinated against rabies, canine distemper and other diseases for which a licensed vaccine exists for use in ferrets.

~~It is also important for ferret owners to understand that the shedding period for the rabies virus is unknown. This may mean that in case of a ferret bite, public health officials may require euthanasia and rabies testing regardless of the immunization status.~~

The change has been approved by the AVMA's Executive Board. While this change is not considered to be controversial, it will not be official until the AVMA House of Delegates approves the report of the Council at its July 23-24, 1998 meeting.

### **Rabies Vaccine Label Still Bears Misleading Warning**

The phrase that is deleted from the current AVMA ferret policy is also found on the licensed rabies vaccine for ferrets. The company, Rhone Merieux, of Athens, GA, was required to include this phrase in the package labeling when the vaccine was approved for use in ferrets by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

The AFA has been very unhappy about this labeling for many years because the phrase also applies to the other five species for which the product is approved for use but implies that the warning is for ferrets only.

While the USDA had required the cautionary phrase to warn ferret owners and veterinarians that vaccination would not necessarily protect ferrets that bit humans from lethal rabies testing, the labeling did much to ruin the image of ferrets as pets. By requiring a phrase that mentioned only ferrets specifically, the USDA was implying to end users that the product effect was inferior in ferrets. This has led many public health departments to state that the product was ineffective or unsafe to use.

AFA has objected to the labeling for many years, under the regulations of mislabeling and misbranding for veterinary biological products (Title IX). Dr. Robert Miller, of the USDA's Center for Veterinary Biologics, after recent conversations with the AFA's Diane Rogers,

agreed to contact the vaccine's manufacturer to request that they submit a new label that would not include this warning on the product, particularly in light of the recommendations in the new compendium by the National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians, Inc., which had insisted on the warning in the first place.

AFA is following up with the vaccine manufacturer to ensure that this label change is submitted to USDA as soon as possible. Until the request is submitted, the changes approved by USDA, and old vaccine inventory exhausted, vaccines will continue to bear the old warning.

Diane Rogers, Chair  
Legislative Committee