



## **OIG NEWS ADVISORY: USDA Agencies Assist on Smuggling Investigation**

Washington, D.C., Tuesday, June 30, 2009 – Inspector General Phyllis K. Fong commented upon the transfer last week of rare and exotic beetle specimens to the Smithsonian Institution. The specimens had been held as evidence in a smuggling investigation involving agencies from the Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department of Homeland Security. A press conference featuring the participating Federal agencies was held on June 25, 2009, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to announce the transfer and discuss the case.

The Smithsonian Institution plans to utilize the beetle specimens (some commonly called Hercules Beetle, Elephant Beetle, and Giant Stag Beetle) for teaching and outreach. The specimens will assist in educating the public about issues such as animal diversity, causes of endangered species, threats to agriculture, and animal and human health.

IG Fong said, “These joint investigations demonstrate the dedication and cooperation of several agencies of the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Homeland Security in protecting the United States from pest and disease threats posed by illegal smuggling activities.”

The insects were seized as evidence during two separate Office of Inspector General (OIG) investigations regarding individuals attempting to smuggle the insects through the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) into the United States. The insects were seized at USPS facilities in Mohnton, Pennsylvania and Arlington, Virginia. In the two investigations, the U.S. Postal Service intercepted packages from Japan and Taiwan that contained dozens of live beetles found only in Asian countries. Some of the beetles are as large as a baseball. Due to their uniqueness, USDA’s Agricultural Research Service (ARS) assisted OIG by identifying the type of beetles

that were seized, their country of origin, and their potential impact on vegetation in the United States if they were released or escaped from captivity.

ARS determined that if released, the beetles could cause considerable damage to native plants and agriculture in the United States, a matter of great concern to USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). For example, the Asian longhorned beetle was accidentally introduced into the United States in 1996 via imported wood crates and shipping pallets. The invasive Asian longhorned beetle—*Anoplophora glabripennis* (Motschulsky)—grows and reproduces within healthy and stressed deciduous hardwood tree species, such as maple, birch, horse chestnut, poplar, willow, elm, and ash. The beetle eventually kills the host tree. APHIS is currently eradicating Asian longhorned beetle infestations in New York, Massachusetts, and New Jersey.

In December 2009, a man from Mohnton, Pennsylvania, who was implicated in the case, pled guilty to a one-count felony for illegally importing 25 exotic plant pests into the United States. He was sentenced in Federal court to three years of probation and was ordered to pay a \$5,000 fine. A second subject, a Chinese national who was a college biology major living in Arlington, Virginia, pled guilty to importing plant pests into the United States. He explained his conduct by saying he liked the colorful, exotic beetles and wanted to breed them. He was sentenced to 12 months of probation and ordered to pay a \$2,000 fine.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), U.S. Customs and Border Protection, (CBP) and the U.S. Postal Inspection Service (USPIS) conducted the case jointly with USDA's OIG. Two other USDA agencies—ARS and APHIS—assisted OIG by preserving the beetles to ensure their bodies would remain intact as evidence for the investigation. The U.S. Attorney Offices for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania and Northern District of Virginia prosecuted these cases.

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