



The U.S. Plant Rescue Center Program

How did the program develop?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service established the Plant Rescue Center (PRC) Program in 1978 to care for plants confiscated by the U.S. Government due to noncompliance with the import/export requirements of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). The Service's Division of Management Authority (DMA) enlisted botanical gardens, arboretums, zoological parks, and research institutions in the United States to volunteer as PRCs. Currently, more than 65 institutions in over 18 States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico cooperate as PRCs.

What are the criteria for becoming a PRC?

An institution interested in becoming part of the PRC Program should apply to DMA for approval. There are five basic requirements:

1. The PRC must be a public botanical garden, arboretum, zoological park, or research institution. It must be a government or a privately funded nonprofit entity.
2. At their own expense, cooperators must be able to transfer confiscated plants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) port office to the PRC.
3. The USDA maintains each confiscated plant shipment as a unit. The PRC must accept and maintain the unit for 30 days in the event that the country of export/re-export requests its return.
4. The PRC may incorporate the confiscated plants into its own collection if the country of export/re-export does not request their return within 30 days.

5. After the PRC incorporates the confiscated plants into its collection, it may display, propagate, or otherwise use them for purposes consistent with CITES. They remain U.S. property and the PRC may not trade, sell, or otherwise dispose of them. However, propagules of these plants, which become the property of the PRC, may be traded, sold, or disposed of through other means.

Upon confirmation that the requirements have been met, DMA provides the institution formal notification of acceptance and informs it of the following:

1. Prior to assigning a confiscated plant shipment, DMA will contact the PRC to identify available plants and ascertain the PRC's interest in receiving them. No plants will be sent to a PRC without its approval.
2. Plant shipments usually will be sent by USDA plant inspection officials. There will usually be no need for the PRC to make any arrangements other than to accept and maintain a shipment when it arrives. Occasionally, the PRC may be asked to transfer the shipment, at its own expense, from the plant inspection station to the PRC.
3. Unless otherwise agreed to in advance, plant shipments will be sent under U.S. Government franked mailing labels.
4. The USDA will provide any quarantine or phytosanitary treatment necessary before plants are sent to the PRC.
5. The PRC must notify DMA by letter when the plants arrive and maintain the plant shipment as a unit for 30 days.
6. After 30 days, the PRC may display, propagate, or use the plants for other purposes consistent with CITES.

7. Should the country of export/re-export ask for the return of the plants, that country is responsible for the air freight of the shipment. The PRC would then be asked to deliver the package to the nearest airline, as advised by DMA.

What factors determine which PRCs receive which plants?

Several factors determine where confiscated plants are sent. The port at which the plants were seized, distance to an appropriate PRC, weather/season/climate, and expertise of the PRCs are all factored into DMA's determination. Plants held in Hawaii or Puerto Rico usually are assigned to local PRCs rather than to PRCs on the mainland. DMA usually does not assign plants to PRCs in the northern United States during winter months to avoid freezing while in transit. DMA also considers the expertise and limitations of PRCs. Several have expressed interest only in certain taxa. Others only want shipments containing small quantities of plants. Keeping in mind all of these considerations, DMA tries to assign plants in such a way that each of the PRCs receives at least some each year.

What is the PRC assignment procedure?

1. A CITES plant shipment imported into the United States must be inspected by a USDA plant inspector at the port of import. If the inspector finds that the import does not comply with CITES, the shipment usually is confiscated.

2. Upon confiscation, the plant inspector contacts the appropriate USDA official in Washington, D.C., who then contacts DMA. The plant inspector provides data on the quantity of plants, common or scientific names, country of export/re-export, name and address of the importer (and foreign exporter, if available), and USDA shipment control number.

3. DMA reviews the list of recent assignments and selects a candidate PRC to receive the shipment.

4. DMA contacts the PRC and confirms its interest/ability to receive the shipment, then advises Washington USDA of the PRC selected.

5. Washington USDA contacts the USDA plant inspector, who then packages the

specimens for air or surface shipping and sends them, at U.S. Government expense in most cases, to the PRC. Only rarely will PRC officials be asked to pay shipping charges or pick up specimens at the USDA port office themselves.

6. DMA prepares correspondence to the PRC and the USDA confirming the details of the assignment. DMA also prepares correspondence to notify appropriate officials in the country of export/re-export and inquire about their interest in the return of the shipment.

7. After 30 days, if the country of export/re-export has not claimed the shipment, it becomes part of the PRC's collection.

Can plant shipments be returned to the country of export or re-export?

Confiscated plant shipments are available for return to the country of export/re-export provided that an appropriate official in that country notifies DMA within 30 days and arranges to cover return shipping costs. Several countries have requested that plants be returned and they usually are shipped via a national airline, at no cost to the countries. DMA issues a CITES re-export certificate for shipments to be returned.

What are some recent statistics?

During 2002, the USDA confiscated 281 plant shipments in violation of CITES. These shipments contained a total of 10,127 plants (7,702 orchids, 1,334 cycads, 880 cacti, 146 carnivorous plants, 45 euphorbias, and 20 other species) and an additional 5 kilograms of plant seeds. Of these 281 shipments, 280 were assigned to PRCs. One shipment containing a single orchid plant, was returned to the country of export.

**U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
International Affairs
Division of Management Authority
4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Room 700
Arlington, VA 22203
703/358-2104 or 800/358-2104
Fax 703/358-2281
e-mail: managementauthority@fws.gov
<http://international.fws.gov>
<http://permits.fws.gov>**

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