



GLDIATR

Great Lakes Detector of Invasive Aquatics in Trade



AquaSale

Lessons from AquaSale: Recommendations for law makers and regulators

September 2026

Currently, there is no detailed, central repository of laws and regulations governing the sale of plants and animals for every U.S. state. Thus, the GLC GLDIATR team and the National Sea Grant Law Center (NSGLC) partnered to create [AquaSale: A guide to selling and buying aquatic species responsibly](#), a searchable database of restrictions on buying and selling aquatic species released in summer 2026. This online, interactive database enables users to check state laws and regulations to help determine whether their activities comply with state law. Our primary goal in developing this database is to help reduce the spread of AIS through e-commerce.

While compiling this database, we reviewed more than 140 state and federal laws governing the sale and possession of aquatic species. Throughout this process, we encountered numerous challenges related to inconsistent terminology, vague taxonomic designations, and varying levels of detail, which complicated the interpretation and standardization of legal requirements across jurisdictions. Based on this experience, we have compiled recommendations for regulators who create, update, or interpret aquatic species laws to improve their clarity, consistency, and ease of interpretation, thereby facilitating more accurate national-scale assessments and potentially enhancing enforcement. Recommendations presented in this report reflect the views of GLC staff and do not necessarily represent the views of collaborating organizations or individuals.

Recommendations

- Laws should use valid, current scientific names that are consistent with the Integrated Taxonomic Information System (ITIS) or another widely recognized taxonomic authority. If a species is newly identified or its scientific name is contested, include this information and/or note any alternate common or scientific names that may be needed to interpret the law.
- When developing or revising laws, consider whether broad or ambiguous taxonomic designations can be clearly interpreted and effectively enforced. When possible, provide explicit lists of species that are permitted or prohibited. Examples of language that may create ambiguity and should generally be avoided include:

- “All aquarium fish”
 - “Subtropical” or “tropical” species within Family X
 - Broad common names without further definition (e.g., “trout”) which may refer to multiple genera, or even non-salmonids (e.g., spotted sea trout)
 - “All native species of Family X.” Instead, list all applicable native species.
- Explicitly list and define prohibited actions in laws and on regulatory agency websites (e.g., what does it mean to “traffic” a species?). On regulatory agency websites, clearly identify the laws under which each restriction is established.
- When developing or revising laws, consider how e-commerce could be affected, and if desired, develop explicit language to account for this invasion pathway (e.g., consider how to handle sales from outside states, or consider how to regulate related actions such as “offer for sale” vs. “selling,” etc.).
- If there are legal distinctions between the two industries, make clear what regulations pertain to the pet trade vs. aquaculture and clearly define the differences within laws and/or on regulatory agency websites.
- Some state laws do not include a complete list of regulated species in the legal text, instead referring readers to a list maintained by a regulatory agency (often displayed on a government website). This can make it difficult to determine which species are regulated, what restrictions apply to them, and how species are categorized (e.g., prohibited, restricted, or conditionally allowed). Laws should clearly identify where the current species list can be found, and the current species list should specify the actions that are restricted, and define the regulatory categories used. In some cases, species lists are updated on agency websites without the law explicitly stating that the website serves as the authoritative source, creating additional confusion.
- Navigating laws and understanding legal language can be difficult for the average person. State agencies should design explanatory webpages that are easy to interpret and describe exactly which species are affected by which laws, what the restricted actions are (defining them if needed), and the repercussions for breaking the law. It is helpful to list all restricted species (plants and animals) in one spot, but if different, but related, taxa are regulated by different agencies (e.g., aquatic plant AIS regulated by a department of natural resources vs. aquatic noxious weeds regulated by a state agriculture agency) then provide links to the other agencies’ species lists and rules where applicable.
- Lawmakers should make sure there are no conflicting regulations for the same species, either within the state or federally.