

In an effort to curtail the growing number of non-native reptiles in the wild, the state will require owners to implant low-frequency tags in their animals.

By Jill Gambon

Feb. 12, 2007—The state of Florida will require pet pythons and certain other reptiles have low-frequency radio frequency identification chips implanted in them in an effort to crack down on the number of non-native snakes proliferating in the wild. The chips are intended to help wildlife enforcement officers identify the snakes and track down their owners.

Under new rules adopted last week by the [Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission](#) (FWC), several species of pythons, as well as green anacondas and Nile monitor lizards, will have to have integrated transponders (PITs)—passive low-frequency RFID tags—injected under their skin once the animals reach a diameter of 2 inches.

Many other wildlife agencies and researchers have already begun using PIT tags to track a variety of animals, including crustaceans, birds, mammals, amphibians and fish (see [RFID Antenna to Catch Fish](#)). The microchip implant is among a series of new regulations approved by the FWC, including mandatory permits, bite-response plans and specific cage requirements for the reptiles. The rules go into effect Jan. 1, 2008.

"We are trying to foster responsible ownership," says Linda Harrison, a captain in the FWC's law enforcement division. At present, there are no licenses or permits required for reptile ownership. "We are trying to reduce the number of people who are buying these pets on a whim."

The new regulations come as Florida's wildlife and animal control officials are dealing with a growing number of non-native pets that have been released or escaped into the wild. Pythons can grow up to 20 feet in length. Reports of the animals preying on alligators, bobcats and other native wildlife have heightened concerns about the snakes' impacts.

According to Harrison, the regulations do not specify any RFID standards regarding the tags that must be implanted in the reptiles. "We left that to the discretion of the owner," she says. "For people who have already had their animals tagged, we didn't want them to have to retag." The price of the PIT tags is about \$3 to \$7 apiece, and the cost of the implant is about \$40—the rate of a routine veterinarian visit, Harrison says. It is not known how many snakes and lizards will require tagging, though she adds that "conservative estimates" peg the number of Burmese pythons alone in the state of Florida at 3,000.

Harrison expects many pet owners to choose microchips from [Avid Identification Systems](#), popular among pet owners who have the tags implanted to help track their pets if they get lost. The Avid tags, about the size of a grain of rice and enclosed in glass, operate at 125 kHz. The chips are injected into the animal's muscle tissue with a hypodermic needle.

RFID interrogators read the chips' unique identification numbers, which Avid stores in a database it maintains. If a shelter or animal control officer finds a pet, scans it and finds an Avid chip, he or she contacts the company, which can track down the veterinarian who implanted the chip. Pet owners can also pay a fee to register with PETrac, Avid's global database for tracking animals equipped with the tags. In those case, if a pet with an Avid chip is recovered and identified, PETrac contacts the owner directly.

The FWC's 16 enforcement officers will be equipped with RFID interrogators designed to read the tags. No decision has yet been made as to the type of equipment that will be used, says Harrison, though she expects it to be a model able to read multiple frequencies and tags from different vendors.

The [Florida Animal Control Association](#) (FACA), whose primary membership consists of individuals who carry out animal control and protection, supports the microchip requirement to help better track snakes and other non-native animals and reptiles that end up in the wild, according to Bill Armstrong, a board member of the group.

"It's a step in the right direction," he says. Still, Armstrong would like to see the tagging requirements go even further to include all carnivorous pets in Florida. He'd also like to see the mandatory tagging of all pet dogs and cats in Hillsborough County, on the west coast of Florida, where he is director of animal services. There are an estimated 500,000 pet dogs and cats in the county, which includes the city of Tampa. Many of the pets end up lost or as strays, Armstrong says, but the identification chips would help cut down on the number of pets euthanized because owners cannot be tracked down.