

Animal Care Tech Note

Research With Free-Living Wild Animals in Their Natural Habitat and the Animal Welfare Act



The Animal Welfare Act (AWA) and regulations set standards of care and treatment for certain animals used in research, experimentation, teaching, and/or testing. While the AWA regulations cover many types of activities, they include some exceptions for field research involving wild animals in their natural habitat.

The following is quick guidance to assist Institutional Animal Care and Use Committees (IACUCs) at research facilities in determining whether an activity meets the AWA regulatory definition of “field study” and is therefore exempt from oversight or is otherwise covered under the AWA regulations. The AWA itself establishes the legal requirements and standards facilities must follow. For details, refer to the AWA (*United States Code*, Title 7, Chapter 54, Sections 2131–2159) and the Animal Welfare Regulations (*Code of Federal Regulations*, Title 9, Chapter 1, Subchapter A, Parts 1–4).



AWA Regulatory Definitions

Field study: A study conducted on free-living wild animals in their natural habitat. However, this term excludes any study that involves an invasive procedure, harms, or materially alters the behavior of an animal under study.

Wild animal: Any animal that is now or historically has been found in the wild, or in a wild state, within the boundaries of the United States, its Territories, or possessions. This term includes but is not limited to animals such as deer, skunk, opossum, raccoon, mink, armadillo, coyote, squirrel, fox, and wolf.

Major operative procedure: Any surgical intervention that penetrates and exposes a body cavity or any procedure which produces permanent impairment of physical or physiological functions.

Euthanasia: The humane destruction of an animal accomplished by a method that produces rapid unconsciousness and subsequent death without evidence of pain or distress, or a method that utilizes anesthesia produced by an agent that causes painless loss of consciousness and subsequent death.

Role of the IACUC

All research facilities must have an IACUC. Per the AWA, the IACUC is responsible for overseeing and assessing all aspects of the facility’s animal program, including inspecting animal facilities and study areas, investigating complaints of inhumane animal care, and approving or suspending animal research activities. The IACUC is therefore responsible for evaluating whether an activity with wild animals is regulated under the AWA. Note: Animal areas containing free-living animals in their natural habitat need not be included in inspections.

The IACUC is to be composed of members with sufficient experience and expertise to evaluate a research facility’s animal program, facilities, and procedures using animals. Ad hoc consultants may be invited to assist with the evaluations. For example, IACUC members may have sufficient expertise in-house to evaluate biomedical research activities but may need to consult outside experts to advise on field research with wild animals.

If the IACUC determines a research activity is regulated under the AWA, that activity falls under IACUC oversight and must be reviewed semiannually. If the IACUC determines an activity is not AWA-regulated, that activity is not subject to IACUC review.

Quick Guidance

Examples	AWA Oversight	Reason
Procedures where pain/distress is slight or momentary and does not impact well-being, such as: - Observational studies where no animals are captured or handled - Observational studies where human presence does not impact animal behavior	Exempt	Meets the AWA definition of field study
Activities involving invertebrates, reptiles, amphibians, and fish Activities where the species is being used for food, fur, or fiber	Exempt	Species not covered under the AWA
Animal, pest, and population management programs (e.g., culling, relocation, and nonsurgical sterilization) for the purposes of limiting wildlife damage and human interaction	Exempt	Activity not covered under the AWA (not performed for the purposes of research, teaching, testing, or experimentation)
Studies that involve: - major operative procedures - intra-cardiac blood collections - arterial/venous cut downs for catheter placement - surgical implantation of devices	Regulated	Involves an invasive procedure; does not meet the AWA definition of field study
Studies in which an animal experiences: - pain/distress above minimal and slight - trauma, overheating, excessive cooling, behavioral stress, physical harm, or unnecessary discomfort as a result of handling - death as a result of the work, in a manner that does not meet the regulatory definition of "euthanasia" - impaired function such as amputation of a tail/digit used for digging or climbing	Regulated	Harms an animal under study; does not meet the AWA definition of field study
Procedures or activities that: - use hormones or pheromones to change mating or migration patterns for research purposes - cause repeated nest/den disturbance during breeding and rearing of young - relocate migratory animals beyond natural migration routes for research	Regulated	Materially alters the behavior of an animal under study; does not meet the AWA definition of field study



Registration and Annual Reporting

Any facility that conducts AWA-regulated research activities must register with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) as a research facility and meet the law's standards for humane animal care. Federal research facilities are not required to register with USDA but must adhere to the AWA standards. Federal and non-Federal facilities are required to submit an annual report on animal usage to USDA. Animals used in work that meets the regulatory definition of a field study are not to be included in the annual report.

Research facilities that conduct only field studies or other exempt activities do not need to register with USDA. Such facilities are not regulated under the AWA.

For More Information

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