



# WGFD

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## News Release

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### ILLEGAL CRAYFISH INTRODUCTION COSTS COLORADO COMPANY \$100,000

CASPER –The owner of a Colorado company must pay \$100,000 in fines and restitution for illegally transporting rusty crayfish into Wyoming, a U.S. District Court judge ruled on Monday.

Thirty-four-year-old Shannon Skelton, owner of Fort Collins, Colorado-based Colorado Fisheries, Inc., a company that creates fish habitats and sells trophy-quality fish to high-end ranches and fishing lodges, pleaded guilty to one count of unlawful transportation of illegally possessed wildlife, a violation of the Lacey Act. Skelton and Colorado Fisheries, Inc. must jointly pay \$40,000 in fines for the Lacey Act violation, and \$60,000 in restitution to the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. The restitution will pay for expenses incurred to eradicate the illegal crayfish. Chapter 10 of the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission Regulations prohibits the importation of rusty crayfish into the state.

The Lacey Act, [16 U.S.C. §§ 3371-3378](#), protects both plants and wildlife by creating civil and criminal penalties for a wide array of violations. Most notably, the Act prohibits trade in wildlife, fish, and plants that have been illegally taken, possessed, transported or sold. Thus, the Act underscores other federal, state, and foreign laws protecting wildlife by making it a separate offense to take, possess, transport, or sell wildlife that has been taken in violation of those laws. A violation of the Lacey Act automatically results in a federal case. This case was prosecuted in cooperation with the U.S. Attorney's Office and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The case is centered around the illegal importation of rusty crayfish as a forage base for fish in ponds on three private ranches in Wyoming. In May of 2006, a ranch owner who had previously contracted with Colorado Fisheries, Inc. contacted Game and Fish for a permit to move some crayfish from one pond to another on a private ranch near Douglas. Fish biologists requested the identification of the crayfish prior to any movement between the ponds. Upon investigation, biologists identified the prohibited rusty crayfish; a species not previously found in Wyoming. Game and Fish determined that the ranch was unknowingly the victim of illegally stocked crayfish through its dealings with Colorado Fisheries, Inc. Biologists also discovered rusty crayfish had entered a tributary of the North Platte River. Eradication efforts began immediately to remove the unwanted crayfish.

Rusty crayfish (*Orconectes rusticus*) measures two and one-half inches in length (not including claws). They have dark, rusty spots on each side of their carapace (outer body shell). Their claws are grayish-green to reddish-brown and are smoother than most other crayfish. Rusty crayfish can cause a variety of negative environmental and economic impacts when introduced to new waters. They are an aggressive species that often displace native or existing crayfish species. Invading rusty crayfish also reduce the amount and kinds of aquatic plants and invertebrates, and reduce some fish populations. "Rusty crayfish are very aggressive and very prolific," said Al Conder, regional fishery supervisor for the Casper Game and Fish office. "If this species establishes in our waters we could potentially see a loss of our native crayfish species and severe impacts to other aquatic species."

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Perhaps the most serious impact from rusty crayfish is the destruction of aquatic plant beds. Rusty crayfish have been shown to reduce aquatic plant abundance and species diversity. Submerged aquatic plants are important for habitat for invertebrates (which provide food for fish and ducks), shelter for young gamefish, panfish, or forage species of fish, nesting substrate for fish, and erosion control. “Illegal introductions are the most serious violations in terms of damage to aquatic resources and fishing opportunity,” said Mike Stone, chief of fisheries for the Wyoming Game and Fish Department.

To date, Game and Fish has spent \$34,424.81 to remove the crayfish from several ponds and a portion of one stream. Additional expenses will be incurred for monitoring the site and any subsequent eradication efforts.

“We’re very fortunate that we had the opportunity to get there early and control it,” Conder said. “Had we not got there early they would be downstream in the North Platte drainage and upstream toward Casper. If they had made it to the North Platte River we could not have controlled them.”

The Game and Fish Department will continue its efforts to prevent the introduction and/or spread of unwanted species in the state. “This case should show the residents of Wyoming that we take the illegal importation of injurious species very serious,” said Mike Ehlebracht, Investigative Unit Supervisor for the Game and Fish Department.

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Rusty Crayfish



Collection of Rusty Crayfish