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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

***SALMONELLA* INFECTIONS IN CHILDREN LINKED TO ILLEGAL TURTLE SALES**

(MADISON, August 18, 2004)—State health officials today announced that two children have become ill from *Salmonella* bacteria the children apparently contracted from pet turtles sold illegally in Wisconsin. While vacationing in Wisconsin, a family from Kansas purchased some small turtles and their 4 year-old daughter became ill a few days later. The Division of Public Health has now learned of a 2 year-old boy in Wisconsin who became ill after the family purchased some turtles at another retailer in Wisconsin. Both children have since recovered from their illnesses.

Laboratory testing of samples from both children and the water from one of the boy's turtle bowls identified a very unusual type of *Salmonella* bacteria that is rarely found in the United States. This serotype, called *Salmonella pomona*, has been isolated from turtles and other reptiles in past outbreaks of reptile-associated salmonellosis. Furthermore, in the case of the sick boy, the bacteria from the child and his turtle's habitat are an exact match. "The fact that the same unusual serotype of bacteria was isolated from both of the patients as well as the turtles provides a strong link between the turtles and the illnesses suffered by both children." said Mark Wegner, M.D., M.P.H., Chief of the Communicable Disease Epidemiology Section of the Wisconsin Division of Public Health. "In fact, in the case of the young boy's illness, the link to turtles is definite, as evidenced by the matching molecular fingerprint."

Symptoms of *Salmonella* infection include several days of mild to severe diarrhea, abdominal pain, fever and occasionally vomiting. More serious bloodstream infections, although uncommon, can be life threatening, especially in young children, the elderly or in people with weakened immune systems. These symptoms typically appear from 12-72 hours following exposure to the bacteria.

Turtles, like all reptiles, are commonly infected with *Salmonella* bacteria. Because of their size, small turtles are often purchased and handled by young children who are more likely to develop serious illness if infected by *Salmonella* bacteria. Due to the large number of *Salmonella* infections associated with small turtles, the sale or distribution of turtles with a shell less than four inches was banned by the FDA in 1975. This ban resulted in significant decreases in cases of salmonellosis.

MORE...

## TURTLES

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Public health agencies began receiving reports in late July that small turtles were being sold or given away at retail stores, primarily gift stores in popular tourist destinations. Officials at the Division of Public Health at the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services have been working with local health departments and the FDA to notify the retailers of the ban and remove the turtles from the market. In many cases the store owners were not aware that the sale of these turtles is prohibited and most sellers have voluntarily stopped their distribution. However one retailer, Souvenir City in the Wisconsin Dells area, has refused to comply with orders from both the Wisconsin Division of Public Health and the Columbia County Health Department. In this case, legal action will be taken to discontinue the distribution of these turtles to the public.

Although the distribution of small turtles is illegal, owning small turtles is not against the law. People who chose to keep small turtles or any other reptiles as pets should be extremely careful about hygiene after handling them or cleaning their habitat. Parents should supervise children who are handling reptiles and ensure good hand-washing afterwards. Owners who wish to remove the turtles from their home are asked to first contact the seller about returning them to get a refund. If the seller refuses to provide a refund, consumers may contact their local humane society. Wildlife officials caution against releasing the turtles into the wild because they are not native to Wisconsin and could harm the environment.

For more information about reptile-associated salmonellosis, visit the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services website at:

[http://www.dhfs.state.wi.us/dph\\_bcd/communicable/factsheets/index.htm#R](http://www.dhfs.state.wi.us/dph_bcd/communicable/factsheets/index.htm#R).

For recommendations for reptile owners see the CDC website at:

<http://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/animals/reptiles.htm>