

# Animal Research Review Panel Guideline 27-G

## Research Animal Rehoming Guideline – Fish

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### Introduction

This guide is designed to support the implementation of the [Research Animal Rehoming Guidelines](#) and can be used by everyone involved in the use of fish for recognised research purposes. It provides specific guidance on the assessment of research fish for rehoming. This guide aims to:

- assist in the assessment of whether the physiological condition and required environment of the fish indicate that they can be rehomed with only minimal, transient impact on their wellbeing
  - prioritise the welfare of the fish and the safety and satisfaction of the public
  - ensure fish being rehomed are fit for their intended purpose, healthy and up to date on all standard preventative care
  - ensure rehoming conforms to national, state, and local legislation and regulations.
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### Approach to rehoming

Research establishments may institute their own rehoming program, or they may partner with one or more external rehoming groups. Before assessing animals for rehoming, it is essential to decide on the avenues for rehoming, taking into consideration:

- internal resources to manage the rehoming of the animal
- agreements in place with external rehoming groups
- availability of a suitable owner or responsible organisation to:
  - care and maintain the animals in an appropriate species-specific environment
  - the enrichment of the environment the fish will be introduced to (including an assessment of other aquatic species)
  - the risk of the fish being released into the natural environment
  - provide routine care and husbandry procedures
  - assist with special care needs of individual healthy animals
- the capacity (number of animals) that can be rehomed via the research establishment's own rehoming program and via external rehoming groups.

Establishing good communication with rehoming groups can be beneficial as they can provide advice on:

- the likely success of rehoming
  - best methods of rehoming (such as pairing or bonding animals)
  - preparing the animals before they are released from the research establishment
  - appropriate transportation requirements for fish
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- identification of special cases and care strategies where an animal may need assistance to transition from the research environment
  - information/animal profiles needed to assist in rehoming.
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## Eligibility for rehoming

If an animal is healthy or has manageable health or behavioural issues it should be considered for rehoming.

Where animals are eligible for rehoming, assessment for rehoming should consider:

- the animal's age and life expectancy. These are not usually primary determining factors
- the animal's general and physical health and wellbeing
- the procedures the animal has been involved with and any ongoing sensitivities that may have resulted with respect to animal handling, feeding and general care. Appropriate consideration of these may include behaviour modification to improve the animal's response and/or notifying the new owners of the animal's specific sensitivities
- whether the rehoming process is likely to have minimal, transient impact on their wellbeing.

Fish are commonly kept and thus suitable food, care information and veterinary services are available.

There are situations where rehoming of an animal is not an available or appropriate option. These situations should be identified in your accredited research establishment's rehoming policy.

Some of these situations will be clear before research commences, for example:

- the AEC has approved the reuse of the animal for research
- the AEC has approved the humane killing of animals for essential sample collection or testing
- laws and regulations that prohibit rehoming, for reasons such as risk to public health, biosecurity and the environment. For example, there may be restrictions on releasing animals that are genetically modified or that have been treated with certain substances (e.g. drugs, chemicals, infectious agents) and devices.

Other situations may only become apparent during the research project, or at its conclusion, for example:

- the AEC and institutional designated staff responsible for rehoming have good reason to believe that rehoming would not be in an animal's best interests, with consideration given to the quality of life, and life expectancy of the animal, including instances where the cumulative impact from use could have negative welfare outcomes for an animal
- when the behaviour of an animal indicates that it may pose a risk to public safety.

It is recommended that the research institution, rehoming organisation and prospective owner review the relevant legislation prior to any fish being rehomed. Current NSW animal welfare legislation is available at the NSW DPI [Animal welfare regulation](#) webpage. Information regarding prohibitions on releasing fish into NSW public waters and prohibited fish species in NSW is available at the NSW DPI [Aquarium owners and trade](#) webpage.

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## During the research project

Planning for the eventual rehoming of animals involved in research should be integrated into the animals' care plan from the beginning of their involvement in any study. The rehoming coordinator should ensure that appropriate monitoring of the programs of socialisation, habituation, environmental enrichment and training are occurring during the research project to increase the chance of successful rehoming. These programs should be outlined in the accredited research establishment's procedure for the preparation of animals for rehoming. The rehoming coordinator should ensure early remedial action is taken, if possible, where an animal is deviating from the desired outcomes of those programs.

Periodic behavioural assessments should be carried out and recorded by animal care staff during the research project. There may be benefits for team morale in involving staff in the rehoming process – e.g. by forming a small rehoming committee. Staff should record behavioural observations, to be used when assessing the suitability of animals for rehoming. Where these observations reveal animals are stressed, efforts should be made to remove or reduce the stressors if possible.

Fish should receive all applicable routine prophylactic treatments, including vaccinations and parasite control.

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## Following conclusion of use

A final assessment of animals should not be undertaken until the animals have been given time to recover in a suitable environment that provides for normal species-specific behaviours.

Prior to making a final assessment, efforts should also be made to rehabilitate animals with known problem behaviours or that have health conditions that temporarily make them unsuitable for rehoming. It should be noted that rehoming organisations may be prepared to take on or assist in rehabilitating such animals.

## Physical assessment of fish

Fish should be assessed by a veterinarian as being physically healthy before rehoming. A physical assessment should consider:

- movement and mobility: should swim with normal mobility, normal swimming behaviours and patterns, and in the normal areas of the enclosure or water column
- neurological soundness: general reflexes, not ataxic (uncoordinated)
- body condition score, for example, a score out of 5 (useful for most fish):
  1. Emaciated – head larger than body (lateral view), concave belly, body narrower than head (dorsal view)
  2. Thin – head and body equal size (lateral view), belly is flat (neither concave or convex), head and body equal width (dorsal view)
  3. Ideal – body larger than head (lateral view), belly slightly rounded (convex), head is slightly narrower than body (dorsal view)
  4. Overweight – body is significantly larger than head (lateral view), belly is clearly rounded (convex), head is clearly narrower than the body (dorsal view)
  5. Obese – body significantly larger than head (lateral view), belly is significantly rounded (convex), head is significantly narrower than the body (dorsal view).
- body and scales: look for signs of colour changes (darkening or lightening), loss of scales, skin lesions, thick and/or cloudy mucus coat, skin erosions, swellings, ectoparasites, white or black

dots (as evidence of parasite infestation), lumps, growths, signs of infection, trauma, and skeletal deformities. The body should be symmetrical and scales, if present, should lie flat against the body of the fish

- gills: should be bright red with a thin mucus coat with no significant lesions, no evidence of clubbing of the gill filaments or bleeding, and have a normal operculum rate
- eyes: should be clear, symmetrical, not bulging
- fins: should be without abnormalities and symmetrical without being frayed or haemorrhaging, or clubbed
- a history of inappetence
- a history of watery faeces
- any other abnormality.

The significance and appropriate management of any abnormal findings must be determined with veterinary advice. Base rehoming decisions on the expected impact on the fish's long-term quality of life.

### **Behavioural assessment of fish**

Fish assessed as physically sound should be behaviourally assessed prior to rehoming, to gauge their likelihood of adapting to post-research life.

Where possible, conduct behavioural assessments on animals that are not stressed to better understand their suitability for rehoming.

This assessment should be undertaken by people that are familiar with species-typical behaviour (usually a suitably qualified animal care staff member and a veterinarian). It should take into account the history of behavioural assessments carried out and recorded over time by animal care staff since the commencement of the research project.

Reasons for conducting behavioural assessments include:

- assessing animals for rehoming
- understanding the temperament and needs of the animal
- exploring whether the animal displays any behaviours that have bearing on their rehoming.

A behavioural assessment should consider whether the fish:

- interacts with and tolerates other fish of the same species
- can be kept in a group or only on its own
- continually chases other fish
- continually hides.

Presence or absence of one of these behavioural characteristics should not by itself ordinarily preclude rehoming. Potential recipients who are aware that an animal does not possess preferred behavioural characteristics may still wish to rehome it.

It is the responsibility of the establishment to decide on the applicability of specific temperament assessment tools to its situation.

The response of an animal is best recorded as a description of behaviour (e.g. chases or hides), rather than an interpretation of the behaviour or emotion (e.g. scared, excessively reactive or aggressive) so that the animal is judged as objectively as possible.

A fish with undesirable behaviours can often be rehomed satisfactorily when the recipient has been informed and is prepared to accept such behaviours.

Fear of humans can be reduced if fish have regular positive interactions with animal carers.

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