

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

October 1, 2024

Dr. Michael Watson
Administrator
United States Department of Agriculture
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
4700 River Road
Riverdale, MD 20737

Dear Dr. Watson:

As champions of animal welfare and wellbeing, and supporters of the accredited zoo and aquarium community, we write to express our concerns about Animal Welfare Act Class C exhibitor license inspections. We understand the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is facing challenges in maintaining a robust, professional inspector workforce. We hope to work with APHIS to ensure that inspections are consistent, fair, and effective nationwide.

The Animal Welfare Act (AWA) and its regulations set basic standards for the humane treatment and care of certain animals. Facility inspections – and the inspector workforce carrying out these inspections – are at the core of implementing and enforcing the AWA.

We expect APHIS to effectively enforce the AWA, but it has come to our attention that Class C license holders are having a wide range of inspection experiences, including citations related to interactions between social animals, animals in more complex and stimulating habitats, and animals in multi-species exhibits. While the existing appeals process and new legal rulings remain at the disposal of all licensees to remedy concerns, the standards set forth by the AWA are only meaningful if they are clearly understood and applied consistently across the country, regardless of the inspector conducting the inspection.

As concern about inspection policy and consistency grows, we would be grateful for responses to the following questions:

1. How is APHIS prioritizing its inspection workload, especially in light of a limited inspector workforce, and difficulties in retention and recruitment? How is risk management used in determining priorities? Does APHIS prioritize inspection of facilities with a documented history of serious, repeat noncompliance, and if so, how, and what enforcement actions have been taken? How are facilities with good, longstanding records of compliance recognized and incentivized?
2. What specific policies does APHIS have in place for animal injuries that do not involve human errors or interactions, including instances when an animal is injured due to natural negative interactions that occurred because of socializing practices? How does APHIS appropriately balance physical safety and welfare while also ensuring animal social needs are met, even if that carries an element of risk?
3. What training, mentoring, and professional development are required by APHIS to ensure consistency in inspection outcomes and inspector interpretation of the AWA? How does APHIS ensure consistency in its appeals decisions?

4. How does APHIS communicate policy changes to its inspector workforce? How does APHIS communicate policy changes to its licensees? Do you see potential benefit in exploring educational partnerships with the community of regulated facilities?

Thank you for your attention to this issue and for your leadership in ensuring that the Animal Welfare Act is well – and consistently – enforced. We believe that setting effective priorities for inspection and enforcement, improved training and mentoring for inspectors, and building appropriate partnerships with your regulated community will be increasingly crucial to success, and we stand ready to support as necessary.

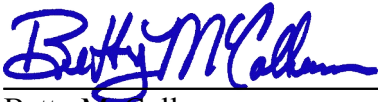
Sincerely,



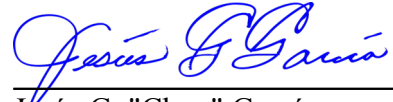
Andrew R. Garbarino
Member of Congress




Mike Quigley
Member of Congress



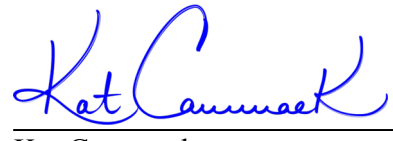
Betty McCollum
Member of Congress



Jesús G. "Chuy" García
Member of Congress



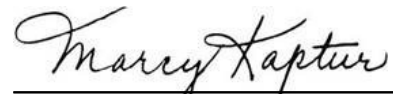
Julia Brownley
Member of Congress



Kat Cammack
Member of Congress



C. A. Dutch Ruppertsberger
Member of Congress



Marcy Kaptur
Member of Congress



Nicole Malliotakis
Member of Congress



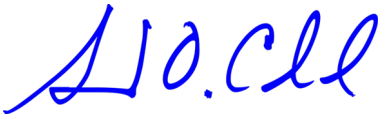
Marcus J. Molinaro
Member of Congress



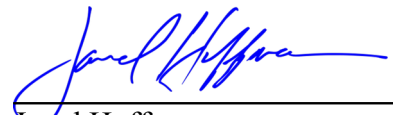
Valerie P. Foushee
Member of Congress



Brian Fitzpatrick
Member of Congress



Salud Carbajal
Member of Congress



Jared Huffman
Member of Congress



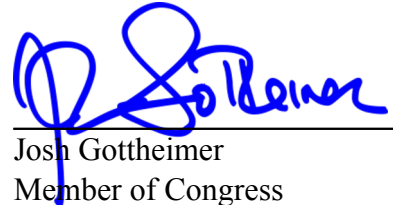
Paul A. Gosar, D.D.S.
Member of Congress



Troy E. Nehls
Member of Congress



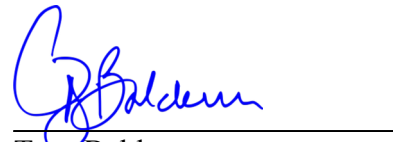
Garret Graves
Member of Congress



Josh Gottheimer
Member of Congress



Darren Soto
Member of Congress



Troy Balderson
Member of Congress



Jim Costa
Member of Congress



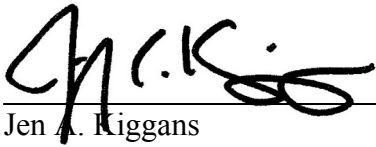
Brandon Williams
Member of Congress



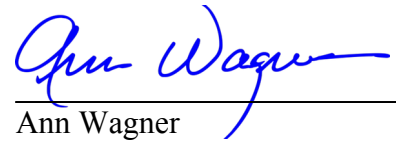
C. Scott Franklin
Member of Congress



Gus M. Bilirakis
Member of Congress



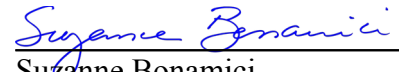
Jen A. Riggans
Member of Congress



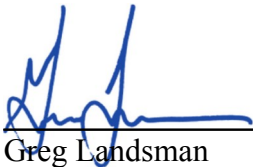
Ann Wagner
Member of Congress




Cliff Bentz
Member of Congress



Suzanne Bonamici
Member of Congress



Greg Landsman
Member of Congress



Tony Gonzales
Member of Congress



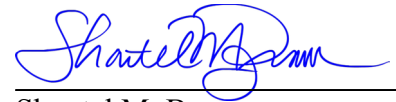
Joe Wilson
Member of Congress



Charles J. "Chuck" Fleischmann
Member of Congress



Scott H. Peters
Member of Congress



Shontel M. Brown
Member of Congress



Jim Tokuda
Member of Congress



Earl Blumenauer
Member of Congress



Morgan McGarvey
Member of Congress



Daniel Webster
Member of Congress



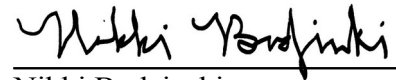
Gabe Amo
Member of Congress



Nick LaLota
Member of Congress



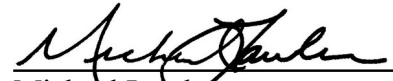
Glenn "GT" Thompson
Member of Congress



Nikki Budzinski
Member of Congress



Dusty Johnson
Member of Congress



Michael Lawler
Member of Congress