

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 11, 2016

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

We write to urge you to strictly prohibit, under the Animal Welfare Act (AWA) animal handling regulations, public contact with big cats, bears, and nonhuman primates of any age. When individuals other than trained employees or veterinarians come into direct or unsafe close contact with these animals, regardless of age, it fails to protect animal welfare and public safety and undermines the conservation of endangered species.

In October 2012, a broad coalition of animal protection organizations, sanctuaries, professionally-run zoos, animal behavior experts, and conservationists submitted a petition requesting that the agency take action to prohibit public contact with big cats, bears, and nonhuman primates. In August 2013, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued a notice in the Federal Register requesting comments on the petition. However, the agency has yet to take action to amend its regulations or animal care policies.

Big cats, bears, and nonhuman primates (including endangered species like tigers, cheetahs, orangutans, and chimpanzees) that interact with the public are irresponsibly bred, forcibly separated from their mothers, and frequently subjected to horrific, abusive practices. Public handling begins when young exotic animals appear deceptively unthreatening and lasts until the animals have grown large enough to present a clear danger to the public. At that point, these menageries typically send the animals into the exotic animal trade, where they might be kept as backyard pets, sentenced to life at another substandard roadside zoo, or even slaughtered for human consumption. A lucky few may end up in accredited sanctuaries, in which case animal welfare groups will bear the financial burden of providing care for a decade or more.

The steady flow of big cats, bears, and nonhuman primates produced by petting zoo operations puts an excessive burden on law enforcement and government agencies and poses an increased risk of attacks and escapes. Ultimately, taxpayers, as well as the law-abiding sanctuary community, foot the bill in the wake of attacks, escapes, or confiscations that inevitably result from the country's growing population of captive exotic animals.

There is simply no safe or humane way to allow for public handling of big cats, bears, or nonhuman primates of any age, and it is essential that USDA explicitly and expeditiously prohibit such activity under the AWA regulations.

Thank you giving your attention to this important matter. We appreciate the opportunity to provide input on this process and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Richard Blumenthal in blue ink.

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

Handwritten signature of Bernard Sanders in blue ink.

Bernard Sanders
United States Senator