

Kay Carter-Corker: Good morning, or good afternoon, depending upon your location. I am Kay Carter-Corker, Assistant Deputy Administrator for Animal Care. Thank you for your interest and participation in this Stakeholder Engagement Listening Session. USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service is considering whether to revise the Animal Welfare Act regulations governing the handling of and public contact with dangerous animals.

In 2012 a coalition of animal advocacy organizations petitioned APHIS to ban all public contact with dangerous animals exhibited under the Animal Welfare Act. The Agency published the petition and received more than 15,000 comments. APHIS is now reopening the comment period until August 31st of 2016 as it seeks the public's input on additional questions that will help the Agency better determine its course of action. The questions are listed in the Federal Register notice and on our "Handling of Dangerous Animals" webpage.

We realize that three minutes is not sufficient time to respond to all eight questions. If you wish to offer comments during the listening session, you may consider focusing on one or two questions. With that said, we are interested in gathering all of the information you wish to present and encourage everyone to submit written comments on Regulations.gov. Once again, the link to the official docket on Regulations.gov can be found on Animal Care's website.

Today we look forward to receiving your input on one or more of the eight questions addressing the handling of dangerous animals. Thank you in advance for your information and interest on this topic and this process. We are here to listen, and so I'll turn control back to the operator.

Operator: Ladies and gentlemen, as we move to the presentation phase, please feel free to place yourself into the presentation queue by pressing pound-two on your telephone keypad. You will then hear a notification when your line is unmuted. Please then identify yourself, as well as your Agency. Each speaker will be allowed three minutes to present their oral comments. I will let you know when you have 30 seconds left to speak. All comments will be recorded, and a transcript of the session will be available on Animal Care's "Handling Dangerous Animals" website. We are now ready to start the speakers. First speaker, your line is unmuted.

Carole Baskin: Hello. My name is Carole Baskin. I am from Big Cat Rescue. I appreciate the fact that USDA is allowing for these comment periods and this verbal one today. What I would like to do is to say that I absolutely oppose the use of any exotic animal for handling. I would like to play for you a PSA that we will be putting out on that.

I feel like the vast majority of people understand that wild animals should not be used in these pay-to-play schemes. I hope that you will be hearing from them instead of what I expect you will be hearing from, which are mostly the people who use those animals for money-making schemes. That's all I have. Thank you.

Operator: All right. Thank you very much. As we move to our next caller ... your line is open.

Anna Frostic: Yes, hi, this is Anna Frostic from the Humane Society of the United States. I just wanted to thank USDA for continuing to take a hard look at the petition that we submitted in 2012. We greatly appreciate the interim action that you took in April on neonatal cats, which has already led to at least one facility discontinuing the inhumane and unsafe practice of cub petting. We strongly encourage the Agency to take comprehensive action, requested in our petition, which has clear scientific support and is necessary to comply with the statutory mandate of the Animal Welfare Act. We will certainly be submitting written comments presenting additional science and also gathering support from our members. In the earlier comment period in 2013, the coalition of groups that filed the petition submitted over 64,000 comments in support of the petition. It's a little unclear at this point why Regulations.gov is only recognizing 15,000 of those comments, but we will ensure that there's strong public support for comprehensive action to prohibit the use of big cats, bears, and non-human primates and other dangerous wild animals of any age in public-contact exhibition. Thank you.

Operator: All right. Thank you very much. To our next caller, your line is open.

C A Nasser: Hi, this is Carney Anne Nasser with the Animal Legal Defense Fund. I'd also like to thank the USDA for reopening the comment period on this and moving forward with what we hope will be a total prohibition on contact with big cats, bears, and primates of any age.

I recently published a law review article called "Welcome to the Jungle: How Loopholes in the Federal Endangered Species Act and Animal Welfare Act are Feeding a Tiger Crisis in America." Half of my paper is focused on the deleterious impacts of allowing cub-petting opportunities. US Fish and Wildlife Service has done its part in closing the generic tiger loophole, which is the other major regulatory loophole that has been feeding this tiger problem. Allowing cub petting is the incentive for these unscrupulous breeders to continue perpetuating a supply of tigers with not enough reputable places to put them when they're done using them for these lucrative pay-to-play experiences.

Not only are we exposing the public to zoonotic diseases, ripping tigers away from their mothers before the natural age of weaning in order to habituate them to public handling, it's posing a danger to the public. Frequently these cats end up with metabolic bone disease because they're underfed in order to stretch past that sort of rough 12-week ceiling that the USDA has been approximately operating under. It really defies the purpose and intent of the Animal Welfare Act to provide for the humane care and handling of animals, to allow any sort of public-contact opportunities with big cats, bears, or primates at any age. Thank you.

Operator: All right. Thank you very much. Ladies and gentlemen, just as a reminder, pressing pound-two on your telephone keypad will put you into our presentation queue. You will have three minutes to make your comment. Once again, pressing pound-two will enter you into our presentation queue ... Okay, I'm not seeing any further hands at this time ... All right. All right, here we are. Caller, your line is unmuted.

Lisa Salamat: Thank you. Hello, everyone. My name is Lisa Salamat. I'm with the Wildcat Conservation Legal Aid Society. I'd also like to thank USDA-APHIS for opening up the comment period and agree with all my fellow commenters on everything that they said. This is a very important issue that we need to address. I really hope ... My comment is more based on how USDA-APHIS is looking at this. What is the point of view, perspective? Are we looking at this as animal welfare? Are we looking at this as public health and safety? I hope both.

Secondly, I hope it's not being looked at as business activity for exhibitors. As Carney Anne Nasser eloquently pointed out, these pay-and-play promotions are not within the spirit of the Animal Welfare Act, nor is it in the spirit of the Endangered Species Act. These animals, big cats especially, are endangered or threatened, and to use them in these commercial activities has to come to an end.

We will be submitting comments, and we will be following along with the next open session. Thank you.

Operator: All right. Thank you very much. Moving to our next caller ... Caller, your line is open.

Howard Baskin: My name is Howard Baskin. I'm with Big Cat Rescue. I'd like to address question number 5, which is: What are the most humane training techniques to use with these animals? It's almost universally recognized that positive reinforcement, or operant conditioning, is the only appropriate way to train animals, not physical punishment. There are three reasons, based on our 20 years of experience with operant conditioning, that this simply doesn't work.

One is the nature of cats. They are extremely independent. They will, at an appropriate age, when they're old enough, learn the behaviors, but they will only do them when they want to. The only way to create reliable behavior is punishment. That's why the exhibitors, no matter what they say about using positive reinforcement, always use punishment to train.

The second is that cubs, we're talking about cubs, are too immature to do operant conditioning successfully. If you think about the behavior of cubs, when they're awake ... and they need a lot of sleep, which doesn't happen when they're in these exhibits ... when they're awake, what do they want to do? They are in constant motion, wanting to use their claws, use their teeth, and so

they're not going to concentrate on positive reinforcement, but they understand being punished.

Last, the training here is not to add a new behavior like most training. It is to punish out of them these natural behaviors so that they will be better ... so they will sit still for cub-petting. You're fighting against their natural inclinations to do these things, which is another reason why positive reinforcement will not work. You're not going to get training by positive reinforcement; you're always going to get physical punishment of these cubs, which is a violation of the Animal Welfare Act. But an inspector is not going to be able to see that behavior by the people who have them.

That is the reason why the answer to this question is really that there should be no public handling, because there is no way to train them for public handling to be safe by positive reinforcement.

I'm done.

Operator: All right. Thank you very much, Howard. Moving to our next caller ... Caller, your line is open.

Sam Foster: Hello. My name is Sam Foster. I live in Green Valley, Arizona, and I'm a citizen. I just want to thank with all my heart Big Cat Rescue. I recently visited them, and it virtually changed my life. I have now gone on Facebook, I am meeting with our Representative McSally to do what I can do to pass out the word on the Big Cat Act. What we need is so much more education because people have no idea. You just give them the thing that there are more tigers and lions in Texas that are privately owned than there are in the wild, and people's jaws drop. Once the word gets out I think the human response, if they are human, will be overwhelming. But Big Cat Rescue, I can only thank you. That's all I have to say.

Operator: All right. Thank you very much. All right, moving to our next caller ... Your line is open.

Carole Baskin: Hi, it's Carole Baskin again. I understand nobody could hear the PSA so I'm trying this a different way. It's only 30 seconds, so let me see if it'll play for you this way.

[Female voice:] "When I was just a tiny baby, I was stolen from my parents. I was imprisoned in a cramped cage and was touched and photographed completely against my will, solely for somebody's profit. Then I started to grow bigger, and they locked me away for life."

[Male voice:] "If you knew that was the life of a tiger cub, would you still pay to pet her? Learn how they're exploited through petting and photo-ops at [CubAbuse.com](http://CubAbuse.com)."

Hope you could hear it that time. Thank you.

Operator: All right. Thank you very much. All right, folks, once again if you wish to ask a question, please press pound-two on your telephone keypad, which will enter you into our presentation queue ... We'll give a little bit for people to raise their hands. We do have a caller. Caller, please go ahead; your line is open.

Lisa (Kansas): My name is Lisa. I'm from Kansas. I really haven't been looking into this very long, so I can't answer any of the specific questions. But just an observation: if you let people pet cubs, they think that wild animals can be tamed. That's so wrong. They grow up and then what happens to them? I think it's absolutely imperative that people not be allowed to play with cubs of big cats, bears, primates, all these dangerous animals. That's all I have to say for now. Thank you.

Operator: All right. Thank you very much, Lisa. Folks, once again, pound-two on your telephone keypad will indicate that you wish to make some comments ... Give a couple more minutes for folks to raise their hand if they wish to speak ... Okay, I'm not seeing any more hands as of yet.

K Carter-Corker: Does anybody ... This is Kay Carter-Corker again. Is there anybody who would like to speak?

Operator: We do have one more hand raised. Caller, your line is open.

Lisa Salamat: Hello. This is Lisa Salamat again from Wildcat Conservation Legal Aid Society. I do have a question for Kay. I'm not sure if she can answer it or not, but I'd like to know what the exceptions are going to be ... carved out. It's noted in the Federal Register that there's going to be exceptions carved out ... Thank you.

K Carter-Corker: Lisa, this is Kay Carter-Corker again. We're not ... We don't have any answers to any questions at this time. This is all about hearing from our stakeholders and helping us craft the right direction for this change. So we don't have any answers for you at this moment.

Lisa Salamat: Okay. So you can't answer the question, which certain exceptions would that mean ... at this point?

K Carter-Corker: No, I can't answer any questions at the moment because we don't have any answers at the moment.

Lisa Salamat: Okay. Thank you.

K Carter-Corker: You're welcome.

Operator: All right. Once again, folks, pressing pound-two will indicate that you wish to make comments. All right, we do have a hand raised. Caller, your line is open.

W Stellaard: Hi. This is Wouter Stellaard from the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium. I just wanted to comment on the training of cats with positive reinforcement. I definitely understand that there's challenges with the way cat's are trained and that label of "training" and what does that look like. I agree that we've seen a lot of times where cats are trained by using punishment. That's not saying that positive reinforcement doesn't work with these cats; it is just about the skill level of the trainer. The trainer has to learn a certain level of skill, and I think we see that across species lines. To just state that positive reinforcement doesn't work ... There's other ways to train animals to lay still without using punishment, or reinforce them for laying still. I agree that we need to focus on how the training would work and where that would come from, and maybe how we would look at the skill level of the handler and not so much the animal, and include the history of the animal.

So I think there is much more to say about behavior-decreasing practices and reinforcing practices and all that stuff. I understand that what we've seen so far is in many cases a punishing structure, but I think we can definitely talk about a reinforcing structure. I also agree that that comes with a lot of skill and may be a way to test the skill of a trainer, if that makes sense. That's all I wanted to say.

Operator: All right. Thank you very much. As we move to our next caller ... Caller, your line is open.

Sam Foster: Hello. This is Sam Foster again. I don't believe what I just heard, but that's not what I was going to ask. In the vein of the Humane Society, if you know of a big cat or a bear or whatever, any large animal, that is being mistreated in a inhumane manner, is there any possible legal ramifications for taking the animal away, as you would with dogs, cats, and thank God we've stopped the dog-racing in Arizona. Is there any way of reporting them and having them removed to a safer venue? Just a question. Thank you.

Operator: Thank you very much. All right. We will go to our next caller ... Caller, your line is open.

C A Nasser: Hi. This is Carney Anne from ALDF again. I just wanted to make a point of clarification. With all due respect to the gentleman from the Columbus Zoo, the AZA is opposed to these direct public contacts with cubs and bottle-feeding cub experiences. I think that when we get down to the nuts and bolts of how inherently inconsistent that practice is itself with the purpose and intent of the federal Animal Welfare Act, which is to "ensure the humane handling and care of animals," it's irrelevant how they're being ... whether or not these animals can potentially be trained to do a particular behavior later in life with positive reinforcement training. At the very crux of the issue, we have a training, or a practice, that is universally condemned by anybody who has any sort of sense for experience in a reputable animal husbandry capacity. I just wanted to make that point of clarification.

Operator: All right. Thank you very much. Folks, once again, pound-two if you wish to make any comments to the group or have any feedback to offer our presenters today. We do have a hand raised. Caller, your line is unmuted.

Howard Baskin: This is Howard Baskin again. It may be possible if ... Let me put it this way: if you accept that it's possible that an extremely skilled trainer could indeed train, with positive reinforcement, a young cub, I can guarantee you that the people who are doing cub petting as a business are not going to take the time and cost or effort to achieve that level of training or bother to try that level of training when what they're accustomed to is using physical punishment and what's much easier to do is physical punishment and when anyone without any training can do physical punishment. So as a practical matter, even if you accept the proposition that it could happen, it's not going to happen if you allow it. They're going to continue to use punishment, and an inspector is never going to see it. They're not going to do that in front of an inspector. Thank you.

Operator: Right, Howard, thank you very much for your input. Folks, once again, if you would like to add your input to the conversation, pound-two on your telephone keypad will indicate that you wish to present your comments. Once again, pound-two will indicate that you wish to present your comments ... Give about another minute for folks to raise their hand ... All right, we do have a hand raised. Caller, your line is open.

W Stellaard: Hi. This is Wouter from the Columbus Zoo again. I appreciate your feedback, Howard, and I agree with you. I think that is one of the ways that the people that raised young animals for petting in petting zoos and stuff are definitely not going to take that step. I think what I'm suggesting is to find a way to have the people that do take the time to do the skill, and ... I'm not condoning petting of young animals, but I'm saying, if there is a skill level there, then we should at least test for it, or make it a prerequisite to being part of any of it. If that's going to keep people away from doing it, even better. That's what I had to say. Thank you.

Operator: Right, Wouter, thank you very much. All right, folks, pound-two on your telephone keypad ... About another minute for folks who wish to give feedback ... Folks if you ... as a reminder, if you wish to add any feedback to the discussion, pound-two on your telephone keypad ... All right, Kay, I think we have no further feedback at this time.

K Carter-Corker: Thank you, Aaron. Thank you, everybody, again for providing us your input to help us better determine our course of action regarding the handling of and public contact with dangerous animals. The recording and transcript of this session will be accessible on our webpage. If you were not able to speak during this listening session, you have two additional opportunities on July 6th and August 4th. You will need to register for those sessions. We encourage you to submit full written comments on Regulations.gov. And now the operator will close the session.

Operator: Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining this afternoon's call. The call has now concluded, and you may disconnect.