

April 12, 2013

The Honorable Mark Pryor
Chairman
Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture,
Rural Development, FDA, and Related Agencies
129 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Roy Blunt
Ranking Member
Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture,
Rural Development, FDA, and Related Agencies
190 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Pryor and Ranking Member Blunt:

At this time of intense budget pressure, we are writing to thank the Committee for its outstanding past support for enforcement of key animal welfare laws by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. We also urge you to sustain this effort in Fiscal Year 2014. Your leadership is making a difference, helping to protect the welfare of millions of animals across the country and upholding the values of the American public.

As you know, better enforcement also directly benefits American citizens by:
1) preventing the sale of unhealthy pets from unlawful commercial breeders, commonly referred to as "puppy mills"; 2) improving laboratory conditions that may otherwise impair the scientific integrity of animal-based research; 3) reducing risks of disease transmission from, and dangerous encounters with, wild animals in or during public exhibition; 4) minimizing injury, loss, and death of pets on commercial airline flights due to mishandling and exposure to adverse environmental conditions; 5) decreasing food safety risks to consumers from sick animals who can transmit illness, and injuries to slaughterhouse workers from suffering animals; and 6) dismantling orchestrated dogfights and cockfights that often involve illegal gambling, drug trafficking, human violence, and can contribute to the spread of costly illnesses such as bird flu. In order to continue the important work made possible by the Committee's prior support, we request the following for FY 2014:

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) / Animal Welfare Act (AWA) Enforcement:

We request that you support funding at the level passed by Congress for FY13 of \$26,406,304 for AWA enforcement under APHIS. We commend the Committee for responding in recent years to the urgent need for increased funding for the Animal Care division. The funding has helped improve inspections by Animal Care of approximately 27,916 sites (more than double last year's number), including commercial breeding facilities, laboratories, zoos, circuses, and airlines, to ensure compliance with AWA standards.

In May 2010, USDA's Office of Inspector General released a report criticizing the agency's history of lax oversight of dog dealers, finding that inhumane treatment and horrible conditions often failed to be properly documented and yielded little to no enforcement actions. While Agriculture Secretary Vilsack called for more inspections and a tougher stance on repeat offenders, the agency must have the resources to follow through on that commitment.

USDA is also implementing a new responsibility created by Congress in 2008 – enforcing a ban on imports from foreign puppy mills where puppies are mass produced under inhumane conditions and forced to endure harsh long-distance transport.

Animal Care currently has 127 inspectors (with 11 vacancies), compared to 64 inspectors at the end of the 1990s. An appropriation at the requested level would help the agency continue to address the concerns identified by the OIG, enforce the new puppy import ban, and provide adequate oversight of the many licensed/registered facilities.

APHIS / Horse Protection Act (HPA) Enforcement:

We request that you support \$891,000, the amount provided in last year’s Senate bill, for strengthened enforcement of the Horse Protection Act. Congress enacted the HPA in 1970 to make illegal the abusive practice of “soring,” in which unscrupulous trainers use a variety of methods to inflict pain on sensitive areas of Tennessee Walking Horses’ hooves and legs to exaggerate their high-stepping gait and gain unfair competitive advantage at horse shows. For example, caustic chemicals – such as mustard oil, diesel fuel, and kerosene – are painted on the lower front legs of a horse, then the legs are wrapped for days in plastic wrap and tight bandages to “cook” the chemicals deep into the horse’s flesh, and then heavy chains are attached to slide up and down the horse’s sore legs. Though soring has been illegal for 40 years, this cruel practice continues unabated by the well-intentioned but seriously understaffed APHIS inspection program and the inherent conflicts of interest in the industry self-policing system established to supplement federal enforcement.

A report released in October 2010 by USDA’s Office of Inspector General documents these problems and calls for increased funding to enable the agency to more adequately oversee the law. Several horse show industry groups, animal protection groups, and the key organization of equine veterinarians have also called for funding increases to enable the USDA to do a better job enforcing this law. To meet the goal of the HPA, Animal Care inspectors must be present at more shows. Exhibitors who sore their horses go to great lengths to avoid detection – even fleeing shows when USDA inspectors arrive. With current funding Animal Care is able to attend only about 10% of the more than 500 Tennessee Walking Horse shows held annually.

We greatly appreciated the enactment of a modest increase for Horse Protection Act enforcement in FY12 (bringing the budget for this to \$696,000), the first time in decades that the program received more than \$500,000. An appropriation at the requested level will help ensure that this program doesn’t lose ground but instead builds on that crucial first step in addressing the need for additional inspectors, training, security – for threats of violence against inspectors – and advanced detection equipment.

APHIS / Investigative and Enforcement Services:

We request that you support funding at the level passed by Congress for FY13 of \$15,866,009 for APHIS Investigative and Enforcement Services (IES). We appreciate the Committee’s consistent support for this division. IES handles many important responsibilities, including the investigation of alleged violations of federal animal welfare laws and the initiation of appropriate enforcement actions. The volume of animal welfare cases is rising significantly.

An appropriation at the requested level would enable the agency to keep pace with the additional enforcement workload.

Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) / Humane Methods of Slaughter Act (HMSA) Enforcement:

We request language to ensure strengthened HMSA enforcement. We appreciate the committee's inclusion of language in the FY 2013 committee report regarding humane slaughter. USDA oversight of humane handling rules for animals at slaughter facilities is vitally important not only for animal welfare but also for food safety. Effective day-to-day enforcement can prevent abuses like those previously documented in undercover investigations, and reduce the chance of associated food safety risks and costly recalls of meat and egg products. We therefore urge inclusion of language directing FSIS to ensure that inspectors hired with funding previously provided specifically for Humane Methods of Slaughter Act enforcement focus their attention on overseeing compliance with humane handling rules for live animals as they arrive and are offloaded and handled in pens, chutes, and stunning areas, and that they receive robust national training, including on the Regulatory Essentials, Humane Animal Tracking System, and Public Health Information System.

Office of Inspector General / Animal Fighting Enforcement:

We request that you support funding at the level passed by Congress for FY13 of \$86,779,028 for the Office of Inspector General (OIG) to maintain staff, ensure effectiveness, and allow investigations in various areas, including enforcement of animal fighting laws. We appreciate the Committee's inclusion of funding and language in recent years for USDA's OIG to focus on animal fighting cases. Congress first prohibited most interstate and foreign commerce of animals for fighting in 1976, tightened loopholes in the law in 2002, established felony penalties in 2007, and further strengthened the law as part of the 2008 Farm Bill. We are pleased that USDA is taking seriously its responsibility to enforce this law. Its work with state and local agencies to address these barbaric practices, in which animals are drugged to heighten their aggression and forced to keep fighting even after they've suffered grievous injuries, is commendable.

Dogs bred and trained to fight endanger public safety, and some dogfighters steal pets to use as bait for training their dogs. Also, in 2002-2003 cockfighting was linked to an outbreak of Exotic Newcastle Disease that cost taxpayers more than \$200 million to contain. Cockfighting has further been linked to the death of a number of people in Asia reportedly exposed to bird flu. Given the potential for further costly disease transmission, as well as the animal cruelty involved, we believe it is a sound investment for the federal government to increase its efforts to combat illegal animal fighting activity.

We also support the OIG's auditing and investigative work to improve compliance with the Animal Welfare Act, the Horse Protection Act, and the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act and downed animal rules.

National Institute of Food and Agriculture / Veterinary Medical Services Act:

We request that you support funding at the level passed by Congress for FY13 of \$4,669,627 to continue the implementation of the National Veterinary Medical Service Act (P.L. 108-161). We appreciate that Congress is working to address the critical maldistribution of veterinarians practicing in rural and inner-city areas, as well as in government positions at FSIS and APHIS. A 2009 Government Accountability Office report enumerating the challenges facing veterinary medicine identified that an inadequate number of veterinarians to meet national needs is among the foremost challenges.

Having adequate veterinary care is a core animal welfare concern. To ensure adequate oversight of humane handling and food safety rules, FSIS must be able to fill vacancies in inspector positions. Veterinarians support our nation's defense against bioterrorism. The Centers for Disease Control estimates that 75% of potential bioterrorism agents are zoonotic – transmitted from animals to humans.

Veterinarians are also on the front lines addressing public health problems such as those associated with pet overpopulation, parasites, rabies, chronic wasting disease, and bovine spongiform encephalopathy – "mad cow" disease.

Veterinary school graduates face a crushing debt burden of \$151,672 on average, with an average starting salary of \$65,404. For those who choose employment in underserved rural or inner-city areas or public health practice, the National Veterinary Medical Service Act authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to repay student debt. It also authorizes financial assistance for those who provide services during federal emergency situations such as disease outbreaks.

APHIS / Emergency Management Systems / Disaster Planning for Animals:

We request that you support funding at the level passed by Congress for FY13 of \$991,443 for Animal Care under APHIS' Emergency Management Systems line item. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita demonstrated that many people refuse to evacuate if they are forced to leave their pets behind. The Animal Care division develops infrastructure to help prepare for and respond to animal issues in a disaster and incorporate lessons learned from previous disasters. Funds are used for staff time and resources to support the efforts of state, county and local governments and humane organizations to plan for protection of people with animals. They also enable the agency to participate, in partnership with FEMA, in the National Response Plan without jeopardizing other Animal Care programs.

Thank you for your consideration of these requests. We will be grateful for your leadership in ensuring that funds necessary to protect both animals and people will continue to be available.

Sincerely,

Barbara Boxer

David Vitter