

Abilene Reporter News

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Abilene Zoo included in animal rights complaint

Zoo officials: Group's claim is unfounded

By Sarah Kleiner / Reporter-News Staff Writer

February 3, 2006

An animal rights group asked the federal government Thursday to investigate the condition of elephants housed at the Abilene Zoo and five others across the nation.

Abilene Zoo officials said the group's claims of inadequate and harmful living conditions are unfounded, and they said the zoo is not at risk of losing Tanzy and Tanya, its two African elephants.

In Defense of Animals, a California nonprofit organization, filed the complaint based on medical records without having seen the Abilene Zoo. The complaint was filed with the U.S. Department of Agriculture against Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns and Chester Gipson, deputy administrator of animal care for the USDA.

According to the complaint, Tanzy and Tanya stand in water and urine, which harm their feet, because the floor of their stalls is not sloped.

Jeff Bullock, director of the Abilene Zoo, said the elephants occasionally stand in moisture. The conditions would harm the elephants' feet if their stalls were not cleaned daily, he said. Zoo officials have been investigating different drainage options.

But the elephants do not have foot ailments, contrary to claims in the petition, Bullock said. The Abilene Zoo is cognizant of foot infections in elephants because the No. 1 cause of death among the animals in captivity in the 1980s and 1990s was foot ailments.

Bullock said Abilene's facility is in compliance with all laws regulating zoos.

"Their goal is to get all the elephants out of zoos and into sanctuaries that are really big parks," Bullock said. "They think that will be the saving grace for elephants, but most of those places really don't provide the care on a daily basis that zoos provide."

Suzanne Roy, program director for In Defense of Animals, acknowledged Thursday that she did not visit the Abilene Zoo before filing the petition. She studied medical records obtained from zoos across the nation and included six in the petition filed Thursday.

Roy asked the USDA to either enforce the Animal Welfare Act or relocate the animals to sanctuaries.

Bullock said the Abilene Zoo is not in danger of losing its elephants.

"The city will cooperate with any investigation/questions the USDA may have and comply with any orders that are applicable to the Abilene zoo," City Attorney Sharon Hicks said in an e-mail.

Neither the USDA nor In Defense of Animals contacted the city about the petition, Hicks said.

USDA officials could not be reached for comment.

The Abilene Zoo is accredited by the American Zoo and Aquarium Association, the only organization that accredits zoos in the United States.

"The American Zoo and Aquarium Association believes that the citizen petition filed today with the U.S. Department of Agriculture by an animal rights group is yet another transparent attempt to generate controversy where there is none," Kristin L. Vehrs, interim executive director, said in a statement. "These extremists have strategically targeted elephants as the first, but not the last, species they want to try to ban from zoos."

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Zoos in Thursday's Petition

- Abilene Zoo
- Cameron Park Zoo, Waco
- National Zoo, Washington, D.C.
- Lee Richardson Zoo, Garden City, Kan.
- Reid Park Zoo, Tucson, Ariz.
- Los Angeles Zoo

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