

[back to article](#)

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Protesters to follow elephants into Santa Rosa and Petaluma

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A traveling circus coming to Sonoma County next week is the subject of renewed debate about how it treats its performing elephants and other animals.

The 73-year-old Carson & Barnes Circus will be greeted by demonstrators from a coalition of animal welfare groups when it arrives Monday for two-day engagements first at the Wells Fargo Center in Santa Rosa and later in Petaluma, representatives of the groups said.

The goal is to ensure that circuses stick to human acrobats and clowns in the future, said Angie Bonnert, public relations director for the Humane Society and SPCA of Sonoma County.

Deniz Bolbol, a grassroots organizer for In Defense of Animals, said: "It's really a joint effort with all the different groups making sure people understand that animals in the circus are inherently subjected to cruelty and inhumane conditions."

Officials for Carson & Barnes dispute that characterization.

"You don't stay in business 73 years abusing animals," Carson & Barnes Marketing and Promotion Director Mal Knopf said. "People don't realize all the inspections that we go through," he said, citing routine and surprise inspections by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which enforces the Animal Welfare Act.

Criticism of Carson & Barnes is especially pointed because of an oft-cited 1999 videotaped training session in which one man instructs other personnel to more aggressively use bullhooks and electric prods to dominate the elephants and force their compliance.

PETA, or People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, has posted the video online and made available an affidavit from the videographer outlining alleged abuse.

Knopf on Thursday said the video was cut-and-paste propaganda with dubbed dialog and footage that has nothing to do with the Oklahoma-based circus.

"It's not a reflection, believe me, of how we treat animals," Knopf said from Lodi, where the circus landed Thursday in its tour of greater Bay Area communities.

He also said he and others in the circus world had grown accustomed to leafletters and demonstrations while on tour, especially in California.

Nopf, like circus owner Barbara Miller Byrd, whose own videotaped tribute to her family-run circus features footage of attentive care and grooming, said no one cares more about the animals' welfare than the circus family.

Critics said animals carted from town to town is cruel in itself. Most are kept in cramped enclosures, or in the case of elephants, chained by the leg. Elephants, the primary exotic animal used by Carson & Barnes, suffer because their foot and joint health depends on freedom to move and walk for miles a day, the groups said.

"I think most people go to the circus because they love animals," said RaeLeanncq Smith, PETA's circus and government affairs specialist. "But when they see what goes on behind the scenes...they're horrified."

A review of records from 29 Dept. of Agriculture inspections around the country over the past three years, available online, turned up few compliance problems and no indications of outright abuse at Carson & Barnes facilities.

Problems included two occasions on which elephants were found to have inadequate foot and nail care, including one case where an elephant had a 1 1/2 inch piece of fence wire stuck in its foot; two instances where tuberculosis test samples were contaminated; one where a gap was noted in an elephant fence; and one where a dog slipped out of a breach in its enclosure. In another case, a camel had tipped over its water dish, though it was eventually replaced.

Bonnert said the fact that even simple foot care gets overlooked should be sign of trouble in the organization.

But Knopf said circuses, like restaurants or other businesses under regulation, have occasional oversights that are quickly corrected.

Sonoma-Marin Fair Chief Executive Officer Patricia Conklin said she reviewed the records as a matter of routine before booking the circus into the fairgrounds for shows Wednesday and Thursday.

Though she's had more than a dozen people contact the fair to voice displeasure about the circus engagement, she's also had many callers seeking tickets, which are only sold on the day of performance, she said.

Kristi Buffo, public relations manager for the Wells Fargo Center, similarly reported few protests and lots of interested ticket seekers.

Animal regulation personnel from Sonoma County and the city of Petaluma will be on hand for the different performances to ensure the safety and welfare of the animals.

"We will respond to any complaints," Petaluma Animal Services Manager Nancee Tavares said, "and we'll be looking around, too."

