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USDA SENDS ANIMAL WELFARE DATA INTO DARK HOLE

Kirkpatrick Foundation Renounces USDA Action That Removes All Animal Welfare and Horse Protection Data

Animal experts, advocates, and researchers underscore the need for continuing the USDA's decades-long transparency.

Oklahoma City—On Friday the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced that inspection reports, annual reports, and other information on facilities holding animals protected under the Animal Welfare Act and the Horse Protection Act will no longer be available through searches of Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service's (APHIS) online database. These files have been available for easy and ready research for decades until last Friday's swift action to hide them.

Kirkpatrick Foundation strongly repudiates this action and urges the USDA to return all data to online access, believing animal welfare reports on the USDA's online database are essential to maintaining transparency in the interest of animal welfare. The foundation is concerned that the USDA will issue further orders to remove data on the humane handling of livestock compliance and enforcement actions and food safety violations.

This action essentially eliminates the public's ability to know what is occurring in nearly 9,000 facilities across the U.S. including animal breeders, dealers, exhibitors, transporters, and taxpayer-funded animal research facilities. These reports will now be accessible only through Freedom of Information Act requests, which can take years for approval.

In Oklahoma, more than 260 facilities and individuals have licenses or registrations under the Animal Welfare Act including dog and cat breeders, zoos, exotic animal parks, and research institutions. Information obtained through searches of APHIS's online database was an essential component of research gathered for *The Oklahoma Animal Study*, published by Kirkpatrick Foundation in 2016. Principal Investigator Kristy Wicker says that there would have been no way to determine the number, location, and status of animals located in the state or even fact-check information without access to the database.

<http://kirkpatrickfoundation.com/uploads//the-oklahoma-animal-study-final.pdf>

Louisa McCune, editor of the report and executive director of Kirkpatrick Foundation, concurs. “*The Oklahoma Animal Study* is a landmark report on the condition of Oklahoma animals that would have been impossible to achieve given this new action by the USDA. Anti-humane corporate interests who wish to shield information about these practices are undoubtedly behind this government action.”

Added Wicker, “This information is vital to understanding the welfare of animals in our state. Without it we would have no way to respond quickly and effectively to reports of animal abuse such as those that came to light in recent years at Oklahoma research labs and roadside zoos. The public cares about these issues, but without ready access to this information, there is little accountability and much would go undetected.”

Kirkpatrick Foundation program associate Manda Shank, co-author of *The Oklahoma Animal Study*, attended the Animal Welfare Act at 50 Conference at Harvard University two months ago in December 2016. The federal law, signed by Lyndon Johnson in 1966, is the only law that regulates the treatment of animals in research and exhibition. “Friday’s action contradicts the spirit of the Animal Welfare Act,” she says. “The AWA is designed to protect animals and this shadowing of data does just the opposite.”

The foundation echoes the statement of *National Geographic*: “These records have revealed many cases of abuse and mistreatment of animals, incidents that, if the reports had not been publicly posted, would likely have remained hidden. This action plunges journalists, animal welfare organizations, and the public at large into the dark about animal welfare at facilities across the country. The records document violations of the Animal Welfare Act, the federal law that regulates treatment of animals used for research and exhibition. The USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), which has maintained the online database, cites privacy concerns as justification for the removal. Critics question that reasoning. The agency has long redacted sensitive information from these records, and commercial facilities do not necessarily have the same right to privacy as private individuals.”

Kirkpatrick Foundation was founded in 1955 and makes financial gifts to nonprofit organizations, primarily in central Oklahoma. In 2016, the foundation distributed approximately \$2 million in grants to more than ninety organizations, with a diverse range of programs in arts, culture, education, animal well-being, historic preservation, and environmental conservation. For more information, visit www.kirkpatrickfoundation.com.