

June 4, 2003

Dr. Robert Gibbens, Regional Director
USDA-APHIS
2150 Centre Ave., Bldg. B
Mail Stop #3W11
Fort Collins, CO 80526

Dear Dr. Gibbens:

On Wednesday, May 28, 2003, I visited Wesa-A-Geh-Ya (license #43-C-0196), operated by Ken and Sandra Smith in Warrenton, Missouri. I arrived at approximately 11:30 a.m. and stayed for 45 minutes. There was no one visible on the premises, and no one responded when I knocked on both the office trailer door and house trailer door. Had I been an inspector, and assuming that the Smiths did not supply a travel itinerary, this would have been a violation of “Sec. 2.126 Access and inspection of records and property” that requires licensed exhibitors to have a responsible party available to allow APHIS personnel access to facilities to conduct an animal-welfare inspection.

Wesa-A-Geh-Ya is a backyard breeder of big cats that masquerades as a sanctuary. The Smiths have refused free offers to spay and neuter their animals. Tigers, lions, cougars, and other animals are caged in barren dog runs and other small haphazardly-constructed enclosures. There was no observable form of environment enrichment, pools for the tigers, or adequate space to exercise. The animals were bored and neurotic. From outside the compound, I was able to observe several areas of concern, some documented on the enclosed videotape:

§3.131 Sanitation—The AWA requires that premises be kept clean and sanitary and the use of a safe and effective method of pest control.

An extremely foul odor was inescapable as I walked along the street side and house side of the fenced compound. I observed a fly-infested wheelbarrow filled with decaying body parts inside the compound.

§3.127 Facilities, outdoor—The AWA requires an 8-foot-high perimeter fence around potentially dangerous animals. The fence should be constructed so that it protects the animals in the facility by restricting animals and unauthorized persons from entering and having contact with the animals and to function as a secondary containment system should the animals escape from their cages.

As depicted in the video, Wesa-A-Geh-Ya’s perimeter fencing is extremely flimsy. It is constructed of a light gauge wire, and I would estimate the graduated spacing to run from 4-inches-by-4-inches to 4-inches-by-6-inches. The wire is rusted, and the fencing is bent and bows inward and outward. Support poles are leaning. The fence is seen moving from a light breeze. There are numerous horizontal gaps between fence sections and vertical gaps near the support poles. Security is virtually nonexistent. This compound is located a few yards from the road and apparently left unattended. It would not be difficult for an animal to pry through the gaps in the fencing or knock down weak sections or for an intruder to enter the compound.

§3.125 Facilities, general—The AWA requires that indoor and outdoor housing facilities shall be structurally sound and maintained in good repair to protect the animals from injury and to contain the animals.

Some of the dog houses that serve as shelter appear to be in disrepair.

§3.130 Watering—The AWA states, “If potable water is not accessible to the animals at all times, it must be provided as often as necessary for the health and comfort of the animal.”

Even though the temperature was mild, in the 70s, the video shows two tigers panting and one searching for water in an apparently empty water container.

§3.128 Space requirements—The AWA states, “Inadequate space may be indicated by evidence of malnutrition, poor condition, debility, stress, or abnormal behavior patterns.”

The coat of the thirsty tiger looks dull, dirty, and matted. Another tiger was observed pacing back and forth, a common stereotypic behavior in tigers and other animals who are bored and deprived of space and environment enrichment.

§3.132 Employees—The AWA states, “A sufficient number of adequately trained employees shall be utilized to maintain the professionally acceptable level of husbandry practices set forth in this subpart. Such practices shall be under a supervisor who has a background in animal care.”

Whistleblowers have told PETA that the Smiths have dismissed all their volunteers because so many were coming forward with shocking and persistent complaints of over-breeding, inbreeding, abuse, neglect, and preventable animal deaths. According to the October 7, 2002, inspection report, the Smiths have 64 animals, and they were cited at that time for failure to have a sufficient number of adequately trained employees. With that many animals, one would expect to see a flurry of activity throughout the day with staff cleaning enclosures, preparing food, filling water containers, providing toys, observing health and behaviors, and otherwise providing care for the animals.

Additionally, we learned that a group of high school students toured Wesa-A-Geh-Ya during the weekend of May 31 to June 1, 2003, and were allowed to play with three tiger cubs. They were also told that the Smiths have plans to cross-breed tigers and lions. Please verify that the Smiths' records of acquisition reflect these births.

We ask that the USDA investigate this facility and pursue aggressive enforcement of the AWA. Please inform me of the USDA's findings in this matter. Thank you for your time. I can be reached at 757-622-7382.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Debbie Leahy". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Debbie Leahy, Director
Captive Exotic Animal Department