

May 24, 2006

Dr. Calvin B. Johnson
Secretary of Health
Pennsylvania Department of Health
Health and Welfare Bldg.
Seventh and Forster Sts.
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Urgent fax: 717-787-0191

Dear Dr. Johnson:

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) is an international nonprofit organization with more than 1 million members and supporters dedicated to the protection of animals. As you may be aware, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), along with several state health departments, conducted three studies on the health risks associated with petting zoos, the results of which were presented this past March at the International Conference for Emerging Infectious Diseases. These studies are especially relevant to Pennsylvania citizens, considering the outbreak of *E. coli* in the year 2000 that sickened at least 21 children, one of whom died, who had visiting a petting zoo in Montgomery County. In light of the recent studies, we respectfully request that the Pennsylvania Department of Health issue a public health advisory urging citizens to avoid the health risks associated with petting zoos by steering clear of these exhibits altogether.

The studies, conducted in Florida, North Carolina, and Tennessee, reveal that current hand-washing recommendations are not protecting the public from potentially deadly illnesses when visiting petting zoos. Forms of indirect contact with sick animals—such as wiping just-washed hands on clothing; touching toys, food, or strollers; stepping on manure; and picking up food for animals from the ground—can even pose a health threat. According to Philip M. Tierno Jr., director of Clinical Microbiology and Immunology at New York University Medical Center, “The problem is that the public is not aware of the dynamic of infection. It’s not just on your hands. So, even if you wash your hands, you are not assured that you can’t pick it up.”

Additionally, a report by the CDC in December 2005, “Outbreaks of *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 Associated With Petting Zoos—North Carolina, Florida, and Arizona, 2004-2005,” states that even indirect contact with animals can threaten health. In a Florida outbreak, touching contaminated clothing, shoes, sawdust, or wood shavings contributed to illness. Thirty-three percent of the patients studied contracted *E. coli* by touching sawdust or wood shavings alone. It is unrealistic to expect families visiting fairs and carnivals to practice the degree of sanitation necessary to ensure that all pathogens are removed from their hands, clothing, shoes, strollers, and toys.



PETA

PEOPLE FOR THE ETHICAL
TREATMENT OF ANIMALS

501 FRONT ST.
NORFOLK, VA 23510
757-622-PETA
757-622-0457 (FAX)

PETA.org
Info@peta.org

AN INTERNATIONAL
ORGANIZATION DEDICATED
TO PROTECTING
THE RIGHTS OF ALL ANIMALS

Judging by the Philadelphia Zoo's decision in 2003 to close all animal petting areas after two children who had visited the zoo became ill, it is apparent that Pennsylvania citizens are concerned about the significant safety and health risks to visitors of petting zoos.

Animals used in mobile petting zoos are subjected to the rigors of travel, to confinement, and often to mishandling. Restricted to small pens and cages, these animals are afforded little relief from a continual stream of excited and often unintentionally rough children. Because many of the animals used in petting zoos are relatively inexpensive and therefore viewed as easily replaceable, some operators do not even bother spending money on veterinary care. At the end of the season, animals are often sent to slaughter.

I have attached a factsheet detailing the health hazards of petting zoos for your review. May we meet with you to discuss this matter further? I can be reached at 757-622-7382, extension 8285; by fax at 757-628-0781; or by e-mail at JackieV@peta.org. Thank you for your time and attention to this important matter.

Yours truly,

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

Jackie Vergerio
Animals in Entertainment Specialist
Captive Animals & Entertainment Issues Department

Enclosure: "Health Hazards of Petting Zoos" factsheet