



December 22, 2020  
 Rob Urbach, CEO  
 Iditarod Trail Committee

Dear Mr. Urbach:

I'm writing on behalf of PETA and our more than 6.5 million members and supporters worldwide to urge you to cancel the upcoming Iditarod dogsled race in the face of the resurgent COVID-19 pandemic. You've said that it's a "reality that this virus is still with us and would be devastating to the Alaskan communities on the trail" and even rerouted the race to avoid spreading the virus to Alaskan villages. However, changing the course does nothing to protect the dogs who may not only still be run to their deaths but also can be infected with the virus that causes COVID-19.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has cautioned the public that the disease is far more deadly for those with underlying medical conditions, especially those exhibiting respiratory distress. Dogs forced to run the Iditarod are prone to a number of physiologically stressful and life-threatening conditions that could increase their risk of contracting SARS-CoV-2. According to a report published in the *American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine*, 81% of the dogs who manage to finish the race have lung damage, and as you know, in 2019 a dog named Oshi died from aspiration pneumonia—probably caused by inhaling her own vomit—which is the leading cause of death for dogs who don't survive the race. In 2020, more than 220 dogs were pulled off the trail because of exhaustion, illness, injury, or other causes and a dog named Betty had pneumonia and was in critical condition.

COVID-19 is both a zoonotic disease and a reverse zoonotic disease and therefore can be passed from some nonhuman animals to humans and from humans to nonhuman animals. Unlike humans, dogs cannot socially distance, and the cold only exacerbates the risks and severity of the disease. People are planning to come from all over the world for the race, so the risk of exposure to contagions is high.

In the midst of the global pandemic and growing awareness of inequality, we are all examining our personal impact on society and how we can be more empathetic. For most, this societal reckoning includes reflecting on all the deeply disturbing ways in which animals are violated. In that vein, we urge you to look anew at the Iditarod's practices and cancel the upcoming race for the health and safety of both the dogs and the Alaskan community.

Sincerely,

Monica Bando, M.S., BVSc, Ph.D., MRCVS  
 Captive-Wildlife Veterinarian

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