

June 22, 2016

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The Honorable Sally Jewell Secretary of the Interior U.S. Department of the Interior 1849 C St. N.W. Washington, DC 20240 sally jewell@ios.doi.gov

Dan Ashe Director, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service 1849 C St. N.W., Rm 3331 Washington, DC 20240 dan ashe@fws.gov

Re: Notice of Intent to File Citizen Suit Pursuant to the Endangered **Species Act**

The purpose of this letter is to notify Kathryn P. Stearns as an individual and in her capacity as Director and registered agent of Stearns Zoological Rescue & Rehab Center Inc. (Stearns Zoological), a Florida Corporation located at 37245 Meridian Ave., Dade City, FL 33525, and Executive Director and registered agent of Dade City's Wild Things, Inc. (Wild Things), a Florida Corporation located at 37237 Meridian Ave., Dade City, FL 33525 (hereinafter Stearns Zoological and Wild Things will be referred to collectively as DCWT); Randall "Randy" Stearns, individually and in his capacity as President and Director of Stearns Zoological and President

PEOPLE FOR THE ETHICAL TREATMENT OF ANIMALS FOUNDATION

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- PETA Australia PETA Germany
- PETA Netherlands
- PETA Foundation (U.K.)

of Wild Things; Dorothy Krummel, individually and in her capacity as Secretary of Stearns Zoological and Wild Things; and Kenneth Stearns, individually and in his capacity as Vice President of Wild Things, that People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, Inc. (PETA), intends to file suit against DCWT and these individuals in federal district court pursuant to 16 U.S.C. § 1540(g)(1)(A) of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) for chronic and ongoing violations of the ESA, 16 U.S.C. § 1538(a)(1)(B) and (D), and the corresponding regulations. This letter is being sent to you pursuant to the 60-day notice requirement of 16 U.S.C. § 1540(g)(2)(C).

Specifically, PETA intends to file suit under the ESA against DCWT to challenge and enjoin the facility's ongoing "take" of tigers and its possession of "taken" tigers. Tigers are listed as endangered under the ESA. The current conditions and exhibition of tigers confined at DCWT, described below, "harm" and "harass" them within the meaning of the definition of "take" under the ESA, 16 U.S.C. § 1532(19), and thereby subject them to inhumane treatment. By confining and exhibiting tigers in inadequate, dangerous, and inhumane conditions, DCWT violates Section 9 of the ESA, 16 U.S.C. § 1538(a)(1)(B) and (D), and its corresponding regulation, 50 C.F.R. § 17.21(c)(1), which unequivocally prohibit the "take" of tigers and make it unlawful to wound, harass, or harm endangered animals, and to possess tigers so "taken."

Introduction

Tigers are apex predators and are the largest of all cat species. In the wild, tigers are nocturnal animals who opportunistically hunt or mate in daylight. Wild tigers are territorial animals who roam home ranges of nearly forty square miles. Tiger experts agree that housing captive tigers in small social groups is beneficial to their well-being.

Tiger cubs in the wild are weaned after approximately six months, but remain with their mothers to develop essential survival skills until they are around two years old. Tiger cubs open their eyes for the first time six to fourteen days after they are born, are unable to thermo-regulate independently of their mothers until they are several weeks old, and cubs' immune systems are insufficient to protect them from most communicable diseases until approximately eight weeks old. Unlike common house cats, there are no vaccines approved to protect tiger cubs from common communicable diseases.

Despite these well-known facts, DCWT separates tiger cubs from their mothers shortly after birth in order to use the cubs in encounters with the public, including encounters in which a tiger cub is forced to swim with a DCWT patron, for which DCWT typically charges \$200. During those encounters, the cubs are exposed to numerous members of the public who may harbor communicable diseases, subjected to rough and excessive handling, and are forced to swim despite the cubs' repeated attempts to escape the pool. Prematurely removing cubs from their mothers also allows DCWT to continually breed female tigers to satisfy its demand for new cubs to replace cubs who grow too large and dangerous to be used for public encounters.

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¹ 50 C.F.R. § 17.11(h).

² "Harass" is defined by regulation as an "intentional or negligent act or omission which creates the likelihood of injury to wildlife by annoying it to such an extent as to significantly disrupt normal behavioral patterns which include, but are not limited to, breeding, feeding, or sheltering." *Id.* § 17.3

³ "Harm' . . . means act which actually kills or injures wildlife." *Id*.

⁴ 16 U.S.C. § 1532(19).

PETA's Claims

DCWT harms and harasses infant tiger cubs by prematurely separating them from their mothers.

Animal care professionals do not condone prematurely removing a tiger cub from the mother and agree that cubs should be left with their mothers until species-typical age of dispersal. In the wild, tiger cubs remain with their mothers for nearly two years. In modern zoos, the removal and hand-rearing of tiger cubs is an emergency measure to be put into practice only "when all else has failed." Because this technique is correlated with both depressed growth and increased mortality, it would most appropriately be considered only a last resort for rearing tiger cubs." In light of the nutritional, developmental, and behavioral benefits associated with parental rearing, captive felid cubs should never be separated from their mothers "for exhibit purposes."

The Association of Zoos and Aquariums' (AZA) Tiger Species Survival Plan explains that "cubs should be raised by their mother" because "she does a better job" and the cubs "grow[] up to be better adjusted behaviorally." "Hand-raising in an isolated zoo nursery environment may result in severe behavioral inadequacies." In particular, hand-reared animals go on to display atypical behaviors and do not develop the social skills necessary to interact with members of their species. Hand-reared captive felids are also less likely to reproduce than their maternally reared counterparts. In fact, the "majority of hand-reared female tigers have not produced offspring."

Hand-rearing also leads to a variety of physical problems. Hand-reared cubs typically weigh less than mother-reared cubs and often suffer digestive issues from formula-feeding and unhygienic environments. ¹⁴ It is "correlated with both depressed growth and increased mortality." ¹⁵ Moreover, "[m]any hand-raised tigers develop hair loss at 6-8 weeks of age, possibly due to some deficiency in the diet." ¹⁶ Commercial milk-replacement formulas provide a poor substitute for a mother's milk because they are "not formulated for the unique nutrient requirements of felids." ¹⁷ In light of the

⁵ Linda Kerley et al, *Reproductive Parameters of Wild Female Amur (Siberian) Tigers (Panthera tigris altaica)*, 84 American Society of Mammalogists 288, 295 (2003).

⁶ Angela Kelling et al., *Socialization of a Single Hand-Reared Tiger Cub*, 16 Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science 47, 48 (2013).

⁷ Birth, Growth and Rearing of Tiger Cubs, Management and Conservation of Captive Tigers (Ronald Tilson et al. eds., 2d. ed. 1994), available at https://www.tigerlink.org/husbandry/husband-htm.

⁸ Edwards Hawes, *An Overview of Small Felid Hand-Rearing Techniques and a Case Study for Mexican Margay at the Zoological Society of San Diego*, 35 International Zoo Yearbook 90 (1997).

⁹ Tilson et al., *supra* note 7.

¹⁰ *Id*

¹¹ M. Bertocchi et al, *Welfare of a Pair of Captive Tigers: A Hand-Reared Female and a Parent-Reared Male*, 5 Journal of Advances in Agriculture 545 (2015).

¹² Jill Mellen, Effects of Early Rearing Experience on Subsequent Adult Sexual Behavior Using Domestic Cats Felis Catus as a Model for Exotic Small Felids, 11 Zoo Biology 17–32 (1992).

¹³ Kelling et al., *supra* note 6, at 49.

¹⁴ Declaration of Ron Tilson ¶ 9 (Oct. 16, 2012). Dr. Tilson served as Director of Conservation for the Minnesota Zoo for twenty-one years, and coordinated the AZA's Tiger Species Survival Plan from 1987 to 2011.

¹⁵ Tilson et al., *supra* note 7.

¹⁶ *Id.* (internal citation omitted).

¹⁷ Hawes, *supra* note 8, at 93.

severe physiological and behavioral problems associated with hand-rearing, the mother-cub bond should not be disrupted in any way for at least the first four weeks of the cub's life. 18

DCWT prematurely separated tiger cubs Bindi, Asia, Noah, and Ariel from their mothers shortly after birth so that they could be exploited in commercial tiger cub encounters. DCWT also separated another tiger cub, Luna, from her mother by purchasing her from a facility in Oklahoma shortly after birth to use in similar commercial encounters. More recently, DCWT separated several tiger cubs from their mothers shortly after birth to transport the cubs—without their mothers—to unaccredited exhibitors in Ohio and North Carolina. Upon information and belief, DCWT is engaged in the ongoing pattern and practice of prematurely separating these and other tiger cubs from their mothers so that they can be exploited for profit. These practices "harm" and "harass" both the cubs and their mothers within the meaning of 50 C.F.R. § 17.3. DCWT's practices therefore constitute a "take" in violation of the ESA.

DCWT harms and harasses tiger cubs by forcing them to interact with members of the public.

DCWT routinely uses tiger cubs in public encounters, where the tigers are forced to submit to being held, touched, pet, and kissed by groups of strangers, in some cases, several times per day. Luna, Asia, Noah, Bindi, and other tiger cubs have recently been used in such encounters. It is wellrecognized that "forced proximity to or contact with humans can be deleterious to animal wellbeing." Research on a variety of species demonstrates that stress compromises immunity, impairs coronary health, alters brain structure and function, impairs reproduction, stunts growth, reduces body weight, and increases abnormal behavior. ²⁰ A recent study found that tigers used in the circus exhibited signs of stress when ticket holders were allowed to view the animals in their cages before the shows. ²¹ This finding was similar to those in studies of other big cats, such as leopards ²² and clouded leopards. 23 Indeed, studies on a wide range of species—from pygmy goats to black rhinos to orangutans—have observed that proximity to humans is "a source of stress" for the animals. 24 Interacting with audiences appears to be more stressful for animals than merely being on display.²⁵

Furthermore, "[b]ig cats normally sleep up to 80% of every 24- hour day, but public handling severely interrupts this sleep cycle, causing exhaustion, anxiety, irritability, and associated physiological consequences that compromise[] their immune system."²⁶ Requiring tigers "to be

¹⁹ Kathleen N. Morgan & Christ T. Tromborg, Sources of Stress in Captivity, 102 Applied Animal Behaviour Science

¹⁸ Tilson, et al, *supra* note 7.

²⁰ For a general discussion, see, e.g., P.E. Honess & C.M. Marin, Behavioural and Physiological Aspects of Stress and Aggression in Nonhuman Primates, 30 Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews 390, 394 (2006); Gary P. Moberg, How Behavioral Stress Disrupts the Endocrine Control of Reproduction in Domestic Animals, 74 Journal of Dairy Science 304, 304 (1991); Morgan & Tromborg, *supra* note 19, at 263.

²¹ P.D. Krawczel et al., *Stereotypic Behavior of Circus Tigers: Effects of Performance*, 95 Applied Animal Behaviour

Science 189, 195 (2005).

²² Id. (citing Avanti Mallapur & Ravi Chellam, Environmental Influences on Stereotypy and the Activity Budget of Indian Leopards (Panthera Pardus) in Four Zoos in Southern India, 21 Zoo Biology 585-95 (2002)).

²³ Nadja Wielebnowski et al., Noninvasive Assessment of Adrenal Activity Associated with Husbandry and Behavioral Factors in the North American Clouded Leopard Population, 21 Zoo Biology 77, 90 (2002).

²⁴ Eduardo J. Fernandez et al., Animal-Visitor Interactions in the Modern Zoo: Conflicts and Interventions, 120 Applied Animal Behaviour Science 4-6 (2009) (survey of studies).

²⁵ See, e.g., id. at 6.

²⁶ Declaration of Ron Tilson, *supra* note 14, at ¶12.

active and visible during . . . opening hours when visitors are present, which conflicts with their natural activity pattern," is a cause of chronic stress. ²⁷

Finally, DCWT forces unwilling tiger cubs to interact with the public—despite the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) warning to DCWT "not to force an animal to perform any interaction that the animal does not want to perform, in order to prevent unnecessary discomfort and/or behavioral stress," in violation of the federal Animal Welfare Act (AWA). During encounters, tiger cubs frequently struggle to get up or move away as they are being forced to pose for photographs or to lie on their sides so that customers can touch them. Staff members routinely physically restrain cubs and handle them roughly to keep them in place. The tiger cubs will often cry out in distress.

This practice of forcing tiger cubs to interact with members of the public for profit "harms" and "harasses" the cubs within the meaning of 50 C.F.R. § 17.3, and, therefore constitutes a "take" in violation of the ESA.

DCWT harms and harasses tiger cubs by forcing them to swim with members of the public.

On July 17, 2015, the USDA filed suit against DCWT for numerous violations of the AWA. Among these, the USDA alleges that DCWT "willfully" violated the AWA regulations by forcing tiger cubs to swim with members of the public, despite the cubs' "visibl[e] stress[]" and "obvious discomfort, as exhibited by . . . vocalizing and repeated attempts to exit the pool." In one instance, the USDA complaint describes:

[T]he cub . . . was reluctant to move to the edge of the pool and the handler pulled him by the leash. The cub was later passed from the side of the pool to the handler inside the pool and the cub was apparently under distress by vocalizing and moving around when handled inside the pool in apparent discomfort. After swimming for [a] short distance the cub swam towards the handler located at the pool wall and extended his paws towards the edge of the pool apparently wanting to get out of the pool. Instead of pulling the cat out of the water and stopping the encounter the handler decided to continue with the swimming. ³⁰

According to the USDA complaint, the swim encounters at DCWT cause tiger cubs "behavioral stress, physical harm, or unnecessary discomfort." Again, the agency has warned the facility "not to force an animal to perform any interaction that the animal does not want to perform, in order to prevent unnecessary discomfort and/or behavioral stress" —to no avail. An animal's attempt to escape is a common behavioral response to fear. 33 "One of the most obvious causes of chronic stress in confined wild animals is the inability to respond to fearful situations with active avoidance

³⁰ *Id.* at 2 n.1.

²⁷ Monika S. Szokalski et al., *Enrichment for Captive Tigers (Panthera Tigris): Current Knowledge and Future Directions*, 139 Applied Animal Behaviour Science 1, 2-3 (2012).

²⁸ Complaint, *In re Stearns Zoological Rescue & Rehab Center, Inc.*, AWA Docket No. 15-0146, at 2 n.1 (USDA July 17, 2015) (Ex. 1).

²⁹ *Id.* at 3-4.

 $^{^{31}}$ *Id.* at 3.

³² *Id.* at 2 n.1.

³³ P.H. Hemsworth & J.L. Barnett, *Human-Animal Interactions and Animal Stress*, *in* Biology of Animal Stress: Basic Principles and Implications for Animal Welfare 309, 312 (G. Moberg & J.A. Mench eds., 2000).

and/or escape responses."³⁴ Whether an individual can escape or hide "when confronted with a fear-elicit stressor may determine how well it copes and ultimately survives in the captive environment."³⁵

The USDA complaint also charges DCWT with "using physical abuse to handle or work animals" for lowering a tiger cub into the pool by the tiger's tail; pulling two cubs' tails to restrain them; pulling a cub out of the pool by the tiger's front leg; and holding a cub aloft by the neck. In addition to risking physical injury to the cubs, "[a]versive handling" is "known to cause various welfare problems" in a wide range of species as a "result of chronic stress." Indeed, "even mildly aversive stimuli can have long-term effects if they are sustained, frequent and/or unpredictable."

These practices of forcing unwilling tiger cubs to swim with members of the public for profit—and using abusive methods to compel the cubs' compliance—"harm" and "harass" the cubs within the meaning of 50 C.F.R. § 17.3. DCWT's practices therefore constitute a "take" in violation of the ESA.

DCWT harms and harasses tigers by forcing them to live in injurious conditions.

The conditions at DCWT harm and harass the endangered tigers by depriving them of necessary space; forcing them to live on unnatural, concrete surfaces; depriving them of access to clean pools or other bodies of clean water; and failing to provide them proper enrichment, as follows:

• <u>Inadequate space</u>: A wild tiger's home range can spread over seven to 1,000 square kilometers, and tigers travel widely, from five to thirty kilometers daily in ordinary circumstances, and even fifty to sixty kilometers per day under unusual circumstances. The available evidence demonstrates that "[s]pecies with large territories," like tigers, are "really vulnerable to stress in captivity." Small enclosures—such as those at DCWT—are detrimental to tigers because of the animals' inability to cover large distances in their enclosures. Studies show that tigers in larger enclosures explore more and pace less often. Moreover, "[a] larger enclosure not only provides appropriate space for exercise, but it also allows animal keepers and zoo designers to

³⁹ Gregory Breton & Salome Barrot, *Influence of Enclosure Size on the Distances Covered and Paced by Captive Tigers* (Panthera Tigris), 164 Applied Animal Behaviour Science 66, 67 (2014).

⁴⁰ *Id.*

³⁴ K. Carlstead & D. Shepherdson, *Alleviating Stress in Zoo Animals with Environmental Enrichment, in* Biology of Animal Stress: Basic Principles and Implications for Animal Welfare 337, 340 (G. Moberg & J.A. Mench eds., 2000). ³⁵ Wielebnowski et al., *supra* note 23, at 91.

³⁶ Complaint, In re Stearns Zoological Rescue & Rehab Center, Inc., AWA Docket No. 15-0146, at 4.

³⁷ Ros Clubb & Georgia Mason, A Review of the Welfare of Zoo Elephants in Europe 123 (2002) (surveying the literature).

³⁸ *Id*.

⁴¹ *Id.* (showing "a positive correlation between the size of the enclosure and the total distance covered by the animals" (abstract)).

⁴² Leigh Pitsko, Wild Tigers in Captivity: A Study of the Effects of Captive Environment on Tiger Behavior 29 (2003) (unpublished Master's thesis, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University), *available at* http://www.2ndchance.info/bigcatdiet-Pitsko2003.pdf; *see also* Szokalski et al., *supra* note 27, at 5 (citing M.J. Bashaw et al., *To Hunt or Not to Hunt? A Feeding Enrichment Experiment with Captive Large Felids*, 22 Zoo Biology 189-98 (2003); B.C. White, *Activity Based Exhibition of Five Mammalian Species: Evaluation of Behavioral Changes*, 22 Zoo Biology 269-85 (2003); J. Lyons et al., *The Effects of Physical Characteristics of the Environment and Feeding Regime on the Behavior of Captive Felids*, 16 Zoo Biology 71-83 (1997)).

implement a wider variety of enrichment items Smaller enclosures are restricted in the amount of useable space, which makes it difficult to provide captive animals with a wide variety of enrichment."⁴³ As a result, researchers recently recommended that tiger enclosures be at least 1,000 square meters. ⁴⁴

- <u>Unnatural</u>, concrete surfaces: Concrete is an inadequate flooring surface "due to its porosity, abrasiveness and hardness." In tiger enclosures, surfaces "should not be abrasive so as to cause foot pad trauma during normal movement or exaggerated pacing." If a surface is "too hard, trauma to bony prominences in normal resting or sleeping positions can result." For big cats, "[n]atural substrates such as grass and dirt are recommended for outdoor enclosures." Substrates that "help provide shade and hiding places are extremely important to the psychological and physical welfare of cats." The use of hard, artificial substrates (e.g., cement) should be minimized in outdoor enclosures, as these have been associated with footpad injuries and early symptoms of arthritis." Big cats also should not be given access to wet concrete floors on a regular basis because it will adversely affect footpad health. The porosity of concrete makes it difficult to disinfect and rapidly dry the surface and enables organic debris and contamination to accumulate. In addition, the use of concrete surfaces is more likely to lead to incidence of disease and parasites than soft, natural surfaces. By contrast, the use of natural substrate stimulates natural behaviors in captive tigers, reducing stereotypic behavior and increasing exploratory behaviors.
- <u>Inadequate drainage</u>: The USDA complaint states that DCWT "willfully" violated the AWA standards by failing to provide "a method to rapidly eliminate excess water from tiger enclosures, which had an accumulation of mud and water."⁵⁵
- Failure to provide adequate pools: Tigers in the wild are avid swimmers. Thus, "access to a water pool with abundant clean water substantially enhances" adult captive tigers "overall welfare." Studies demonstrate that "[c]aptive tigers need the opportunity to swim or to simply sit in a body of water." The presence of a water body" enhances tiger well being by "dramatic[ally] decreas[ing] . . . stereotypic pacing and . . . increas[ing] . . . exploratory behaviors." However, "[i]t should be highlighted that it is not only the presence of a pool but the quality of the water that makes the difference in playing a key role in tiger welfare." It

⁴³ *Id.*; *accord* Szokalski et al., *supra* note 27, at 5.

⁴⁴ Breton & Barrot, *supra* note 39, at 73.

⁴⁵ Tilson et al., *supra* note 7.

⁴⁶ *Id*.

⁴⁷ Id

⁴⁸ Lion Care Manual, AZA, Lion Species Survival Plan 22 (Hollie Colahan ed., 2012).

⁴⁹ G. Law et al., *Dispelling Some Common Misconceptions About the Keeping of Felids in Captivity*, 35 International Zoo Yearbook 197, 200 (1997).

⁵⁰ Colahan, *supra* note 48, at 22; *see also* Law et al., *supra* note 49, at 200.

⁵¹ *Id.* at 15.

⁵² Tilson et al., *supra* note 7.

⁵³ Law et al., *supra* note 49, at 199.

⁵⁴ Pitsko, *supra* note 42, at 30.

⁵⁵ Complaint, In re Stearns Zoological Rescue & Rehab Center, Inc., AWA Docket No. 15-0146, at 5.

⁵⁶ Cristina Biolatti, *Behavioural Analysis of Captive Tigers* (Panthera Tigris): *A Water Pool Makes the Difference*, 174 Applied Animal Behaviour Science 173, 179 (2016); *see also* Tilson et al., *supra* note 7 (According to the AZA Tiger SSP, "[a] pool is considered to be [a] very important" element of a tiger enclosure.).

⁵⁷ Pitsko, *supra* note 49, at 31-32.

⁵⁸ *Id.* at 44.

⁵⁹ Biolatti, *supra* note 56, at 179.

- appears that "only [the] presence of a water pool with clean water encourages tigers to perform behaviours considered as indicators of enhanced welfare." ⁶⁰
- <u>Inadequate enrichment</u>: "Environmental enrichment is the process in which animals' captive environments are manipulated to provide various items and spaces that will stimulate their psychological and physiological well being." Enrichment encourages natural behaviors in captive tigers and reduces stereotypies. To optimize their welfare, "tigers should be housed in large enclosures containing natural . . . vegetation, water pools, . . . a variety of resting locations, and a variety of enrichment items." Successful enrichment items "promote novelty in the environment and maintain tiger interest." Access to a clean pool or other body of clean water may be the most important form of enrichment, but other enrichment items also improve tigers' welfare. "[N]atural substrate, vegetation, water features, [and] rocks" are common forms of enrichment. The proper enclosure 'furniture' also "provides the tiger with a variety of sites to stimulate activity, such as different heights "67"

DCWT's failure to meet the endangered tigers' needs for large enclosures, with natural substrates, clean bodies of water, and a variety of enrichment items harms and harasses the tigers within the meaning of 50 C.F.R. § 17.3.

* * *

Please be advised that the conditions set forth herein violate the ESA's prohibitions on the "take" of endangered tigers, as well as the possession of unlawfully taken tigers. Therefore, unless the above-described violations cease immediately, PETA intends to file suit against DCWT and its officers in their official and individual capacities under the ESA at the expiration of sixty (60) days following June 22, 2016. Pursuant to the ESA, the plaintiffs will seek declaratory relief and an injunction against continued violations, including, but not limited to, prohibiting DCWT from exhibiting or housing tigers, as well as attorney's fees and litigation costs.

Any and all communication related to this matter should be directed to me at the address and telephone number listed below.

Very truly yours,

⁶¹ Pitsko, *supra* note 49, at 1.

⁶⁰ *Id*.

⁶² Szokalski et al., *supra* note 27, at 3; *see also* Ivana Gardianova & Petra Bolechova, *Tigers Stereotypic Pacing and Enrichment*, 4 Annual Research & Review in Biology 1544, 1548 (2014); Pitsko, *supra* note 49, at 31 ("A high level of enrichment significantly reduced stereotypic pacing of the captive felids in this study, and was marginally significant in increasing time spent exploring.").

⁶³ Pitsko, *supra* note 49 (abstract).

⁶⁴ Gardianova & Bolechova, *supra* note 62, at 1548.

⁶⁵ Biolatti, *supra* note 56, at 177.

⁶⁶ Pitsko, *supra* note 49, at 14.

⁶⁷ Tilson et al., *supra* note 7.

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Exhibit