

August 26, 2025

Bernadette Juarez, J.D.  
Deputy Administrator  
USDA/APHIS/Animal Care

Via e-mail: [REDACTED] [ac.complaints@usda.gov](mailto:ac.complaints@usda.gov)

Re: Request to Investigate the Unrelieved Suffering of Endangered Elephant Betty, Exhibited by Brett Carden (License No. 43-C-0270)

Dear Ms. Juarez:

I am writing on behalf of PETA to request that the USDA investigate Brett Carden (license no. 43-C-0270), for ongoing apparent Animal Welfare Act (AWA) violations regarding the welfare of Betty, an approximately 56-year-old endangered Asian elephant. **It is well-documented that Betty has suffered for years from unrelieved chronic health problems that warrant confiscation by federal authorities before Carden Circus resumes its tour on September 3** (see Carden's [show schedule](#)).

Elephant expert Dr. Chris Draper, who has over 25 years of experience in animal welfare science, observed Betty in person at the Carden Circus in Rolla, Missouri on May 26 and documented that she was suffering from "significant physical compromise," including joint pain, fractures in her toenails that are susceptible to infection, and impaired use of her trunk—all issues that PETA has previously reported to the USDA. Dr. Draper's detailed assessment, attached as Exhibit 1 and also available [online](#), describes the following:

- Betty was either unable or unwilling to flex her front wrist joint and held her leg straight when walking. (See Video 1 and Video 2.) The tricks she is made to do during the performance, the weight of riders that she carries while walking repeatedly in a small circle, confinement to concrete when not performing, and standing in a trailer during road transport are all factors that Dr. Draper opined put "additional physical stress on already compromised and unhealthy limbs." He stated that it would not be surprising if further deterioration of Betty's joints due to this environment leads to her collapse while on the road or during a show.
- Betty's rear feet had substantial toenail fractures. (See Photos 1–2.) Dr. Draper stated that "cracks can provide a route for acute or chronic infection [which] can cause serious and life-threatening problems in captive elephants such as abscesses or osteomyelitis."
- Betty was unable to use the central section of her trunk, which was visibly atrophied. (See Video 3 and Video 4.) While she was able to move portions of her trunk, including the prehensile finger, her trunk dragged while walking and was rarely lifted. Dr. Draper stated that this indicates "serious muscular or neurological impairment."

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Wildlife veterinarian Dr. Mason Payne reviewed Dr. Draper's evidence and opined that:

- Betty was very slow when walking during rides and during the performance, including “a shuffling gait of the front limbs,” which is consistent with Dr. Draper's first-hand assessment. Dr. Payne stated Betty also appeared to have noticeable hind limb lameness apparent in the video footage, and that she “seems generally painful when ambulating.”
- Betty's hind feet cuticles were overgrown and frayed, and the large vertical crack of the middle nail was “extending the entire nail surface into the coronary band. Nail fractures that extend into this area can be extremely painful and are also prone to infection. The nail is also significantly overgrown and has contact with the ground, which likely helped cause the crack in the first place.” He also noted that uneven weight displacement on her limbs due to joint pain may have contributed to what caused the fracture.
- Betty's trunk “appears weakened and she shows decreased normal trunk behaviors,” indicating the presence of trunk paresis. Traumatic incidents “could cause nerve damage and muscle atrophy” to the trunk, but that even if no causative pathology can be identified with thorough diagnostics (including bloodwork or electromyography), treatment can include anti-inflammatory drugs that are beneficial in acute cases.

The assessments provided by both of these experts are only the latest in the substantial evidence of Betty's ongoing frailty that PETA has supplied to the USDA in a dozen formal complaints since 2010. The progression of her worsening foot and joint problems and increasingly impaired function of her trunk have been reported repeatedly, yet Carden has continued to force this ailing animal to perform in violation of the AWA—and **the USDA has done nothing meaningful to remedy Betty's unrelieved suffering.**

Forcing elephants who show signs of pain and stiffness to give rides plainly violates 9 C.F.R. § 2.131(b)(1) and (d)(1), which require that animals should be handled “in a manner that does not cause ... unnecessary discomfort” and may only be exhibited “under conditions consistent with their good health and well-being.”

In 2011, the USDA cited<sup>1</sup> the Cardens for failing to assess and treat Betty's limb stiffness. Though the USDA has failed to take any enforcement action since then, this violation has never been corrected. For years, Betty has had increasing difficulty executing tricks she's commanded to perform because she is unable to bend her legs or trunk normally. True elephant veterinary experts agree that her debilities are extensive, serious, and painful, and the intense confinement and rigorous travel environment that Betty has endured for decades exacerbates these chronic health concerns. Some of the USDA's most bewildering complaint responses to the multiple reports from PETA and first-hand witnesses have acknowledged that Betty is lame, but conclude that Carden's attending veterinarian's reported determination that she does not need pain medication is adequate care. Lameness is a manifestation of pain or physical impairment, so any conclusion to the contrary is absurd and illogical. It is inexcusable that the USDA has apparently never questioned the validity of the irrational notion that this elderly animal is not in pain.

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<sup>1</sup> See USDA Inspection Report, George Carden Circus International, License No. 43-C-0025, March 17, 2011.

Furthermore, the blind reliance on Carden's veterinarian is alarming given the prevalence of painful arthritis among geriatric elephants, the fact that foot and joint diseases are among the leading reasons captive elephants are euthanized, and the number of cases in which elephants used in circuses have suffered and even died due to a lack of adequate veterinary care from exhibitors' attending veterinarians. Consider the following:

- Asian elephant Beulah (exhibited by Commerford & Sons, license no. 16-C-0006) collapsed and died at a fair, and it was later revealed she had been suffering from a uterine infection that was left untreated and became septic. A veterinarian signed a health certificate allowing Beulah to be transported to this event, despite the licensee knowing that she suffered from periodic urinary infections and suspected that she had uterine tumors. A geriatric animal with such health problems should not be subjected to the stresses of transport and exhibition. The USDA did not cite Commerford over the circumstances that led to Beulah's death, despite the evidence that she died in part because her serious, chronic health problems were overlooked.
- African elephant Megu (exhibited by Brian Franzen, license no. 58-C-0447) was audibly suffering from painful joint crackling, which was so severe the decision was made to remove her from circus exhibition. Franzen's veterinarian had not noticed the obvious debility, even though her lameness had been described in PETA's complaints alleging AWA violations for years.
- African elephant Nosey (exhibited by Hugo Liebel, inactive license no. 58-C-0288) was consistently given a clean bill of health by the attending veterinarian, but upon her seizure by local law enforcement, she was found to be suffering with multiple infections, intestinal parasites, painful osteoarthritis, dehydration, and malnutrition. PETA had submitted multiple complaints about Nosey's poor condition for years, but neither the USDA nor other federal authorities took action to remove her from the conditions that were killing her.

After observing Betty firsthand, Dr. Draper opined that "considering the forces and stresses involved in road transport, combined with her weight, and coupled with continued demands to perform in the circus ring and to provide rides... **I am extremely concerned that Betty faces a catastrophic and likely fatal collapse in the near future.**" This cause for concern is especially warranted given that Carden has a history of evidently working elephants until their breaking point—Jenny, for instance, reportedly fell during a circus performance (which PETA reported to the USDA), suffered a "sprain," and was removed from the show. She died a few months later.

Last year, Betty was on the road virtually nonstop, while Carden hauled her to over 280 circus shows and other events in 17 different states for 11 months of the year. So far in 2025, she has been used for at least 196 shows in 13 different states. She will undoubtedly be at grave risk if Carden is allowed to bring her back on tour in September for the at least 55 more shows it has scheduled through November.

PETA has repeatedly asked the USDA to bar Carden from continuing to force Betty to give rides and perform in shows, and urges the USDA to ensure she is removed from the road. Her only chance at recovery and survival is for federal authorities to confiscate this Endangered Species Act-protected elephant and ensure that she is appropriately treated by a qualified veterinarian with expertise in elephant medicine and husbandry.

Thank you for your attention to this important and urgent matter. Please inform me of the complaint number that your agency assigns to this correspondence.

Very truly yours,



Debbie Metzler, M.S.  
Senior Director of Captive Wildlife  
Captive Animal Law Enforcement  
[REDACTED]

cc: Kamela Caschette, Esq., Trial Attorney, Environment and Natural Resources Division,  
U.S. Department of Justice [REDACTED]

Jim Stinebaugh, Assistant Special Agent in Charge, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service  
[REDACTED]

**Photosheet for Brett Carden**  
**License No. 43-C-0270**  
**May 26, 2025 in Rolla, Missouri**



Photo 1: Betty's rear feet had overgrown and frayed cuticles, and the large vertical crack of the middle nail was extending the entire nail surface into the coronary band.





Photo 2: Zoomed out image to show identify of the elephant, Betty, in Photo 1.