



September 11, 2025

Board of Regents
 University of Washington
 139 Gerberding Hall
 Box 351264
 Seattle, WA 98195-1264
 Delivered in-person and via e-mail: regents@uw.edu

PEOPLE FOR
 THE ETHICAL
 TREATMENT
 OF ANIMALS

Washington
 1536 16th St. N.W.
 Washington, DC 20036
 202-483-PETA

Los Angeles
 2154 W. Sunset Blvd.
 Los Angeles, CA 90026
 323-644-PETA

Norfolk
 501 Front St.
 Norfolk, VA 23510
 757-622-PETA

Info@peta.org
 PETA.org

Dear Regents:

For the past six years, PETA has presented the unvarnished facts about the Washington National Primate Research Center (WaNPRC): chronic leadership failures, repeated federal citations, and a mounting financial and ethical crisis. These warnings have been consistent and well-documented. Now, with a new president at the University of Washington, it is critical that President Jones, and you, as Regents, fully confront the reality—internal communications confirm that the WaNPRC’s Arizona Breeding Colony is financially unsustainable, chronically understaffed, and plagued by deteriorating infrastructure—so untenable that WaNPRC leadership has even contemplated shutting the facility down or transferring the monkeys elsewhere. Meanwhile, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) citations continue to expose serious animal welfare violations.

The Arizona Breeding Colony, established on the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community (SRPMIC) lands in 2012, exemplifies the systemic issues that make the WaNPRC a liability for the university. Maintaining these operations exposes UW to escalating financial, scientific, ethical, and reputational risks. The responsible course is to begin with the orderly closure of the Arizona facility.

Financial Instability

Hundreds of pages of internal communications, obtained by PETA through a public records request (<http://peta.org/WaNPRCInternalComms>), reveal ongoing discussions between WaNPRC leadership—including disgraced former director Michele Basso—and Vice Provost of Research Mari Ostendorf that lay bare the depth and persistence of the center’s financial collapse. Vice Provost Ostendorf acknowledged that one of the director’s primary mandates was to reduce and resolve the WaNPRC deficit.¹ Yet Basso admitted that “**the continued deficit spending regime that WaNPRC is in, has been carried by WaNPRC since 1998, and no previous Director made any progress on this**”,² further conceding that the center suffers from “insufficient financial support, and a crippling legacy debt”.³ Former leadership even linked the WaNPRC’s chronic deficits directly to dangerously inadequate staffing levels at the Arizona facility, writing: “given our lack of funding, we can’t afford to hire vets at their current asking salaries”.⁴

Entities:

- PETA Asia
- PETA India
- PETA France
- PETA Australia
- PETA Germany
- PETA Switzerland
- PETA Netherlands
- PETA Foundation (U.K.)

¹ May 31, 2024. Page 50 of the Public Records Release received by PETA on August 13, 2025

² June 21, 2024. Page 10 of the Public Records Release received by PETA on August 13, 2025

³ May 24, 2024. Page 283 of the Public Records Release received by PETA on August 13, 2025

⁴ July 21, 2023. Page 16 of the Public Records Release received by PETA on August 13, 2025

One “solution” floated in internal communications was to move the Arizona Breeding Colony out of UW’s hands. In July 2023, the then-director proposed relocating the colony to the Oregon National Primate Research Center, the California National Primate Research Center, or Johns Hopkins University.⁵ A meeting with Oregon was even in the works, with the director suggesting that it “may be attractive to NIH if presented as a Pacific Northwest Breeding Facility”.⁶ Yet the same communications conceded that ONPRC was an “unlikely option” because it had no interest in devoting its space to breeding pigtailed macaques.⁷ During that same time period a cryptic email thread suggests the possibility of ongoing soil contamination at the Arizona Breeding Colony “From a scientific standpoint, the facility is an untapped resource if we are not allowed to do the cognitive and transcriptomics profiling of the animals there. Once I hear back from Sherri about how to handle the reporting of the incident that occurred with the soil sampling from the University of AZ scientists, I can begin to think about broaching the topic with the community to see whether we will be able to do this, also with Sherri’s guidance. If we cannot, it is a non-starter for me. **We should move.**”⁸ PETA alerted this Board back in 2021 that toxic plumes from the nearby Nammo Talley rocket-testing site—long known for contaminating regional soil and groundwater with perchlorate⁹—were advancing toward the facility, and this internal correspondence suggests those same risks may remain unresolved.

No one wants to take on pigtailed macaques—they are notoriously difficult to house, costly to maintain, and increasingly out of step with current research priorities. At the same time, their populations are collapsing in the wild, raising serious conservation concerns. Yet UW continues to breed and maintain them in its Arizona Breeding Colony despite its own leadership acknowledging the facility is unsustainable. These admissions are not in the past—the same deficits, staffing shortages, and infrastructure failures persist today.



Decrepit Conditions

Conditions at WaNPRC—especially at its Arizona Breeding Colony—are not just “in need of attention,” they are a scandal. Even UW leadership has admitted as much. In a May 2024 letter to then-director Michele Basso, Vice Provost Ostendorf conceded, “The Arizona breeding colony facility needs additional and ongoing attention.

2021 USDA Inspection Photos of Room 302, the hospital room in the Arizona Breeding Colony. UW has received approximately \$30M in NIH funding for this facility since 2012.

⁵ July 21, 2023. Page 15 of the Public Records Release received by PETA on August 13, 2025

⁶ July 21, 2023. Page 15 of the Public Records Release received by PETA on August 13, 2025

⁷ July 21, 2023. Page 15 of the Public Records Release received by PETA on August 13, 2025

⁸ July 21, 2023. Page 16 of the Public Records Release received by PETA on August 13, 2025

⁹ Arizona Department of Environmental Quality (ADEQ). Nammo Defense Systems Hazardous Waste Site (site summary). Statement: “Additionally, groundwater contaminated with 1,4-dioxane, VOCs, and perchlorate has also migrated to lands owned by SRPMIC, and threatens the use of groundwater produced at production well PF-2. Well PF-2 resides on SRPMIC land leased to a primate research facility, produces non-potable water for facility use, and is monitored for contaminant presence.” Accessed September 10, 2025.

We acknowledged and discussed this urgent situation in multiple regular meetings last year”.¹⁰ Basso herself wrote that “**the simple fact is that that facility appears to have been neglected for a long time and would benefit from significant investment especially if we decide to stay and even if we decide to leave, IMO**”,¹¹ while elsewhere acknowledging the need for a replacement of the “decaying HVAC system”.¹²

The USDA has repeatedly cited UW for its Arizona Breeding Colony—which has accumulated tens of millions of dollars in taxpayer funding from NIH—for conditions that make a mockery of those investments. Inspectors have not only documented peeling paint above the monkeys’ bent and rusted enclosures, but also far graver violations: monkeys escaping from cages, uncontrolled temperatures in “hospital rooms”, animals becoming entrapped in enclosures with limbs broken or torn, accumulations of feces and food waste attracting rodents, and filthy, deteriorating infrastructure that poses clear disease risks to both animals and workers. That a facility so heavily subsidized by the taxpayer still fails at such a fundamental level demonstrates what the university’s own leadership has already admitted: the Arizona Breeding Colony has been neglected for years, and the result is a dangerous, collapsing operation that cannot be justified.

Chronic Leadership Issues

Leadership at the primate center has been defined by scandal and instability. Over the past two decades, WaNPRC directors and associate directors have been ousted for financial mismanagement, sexual harassment, and the loss of critical grant funding. In internal communications, former leadership even admitted that “WaNPRC has experienced challenges with recruitment and retention for many years—including Directors”.¹³ This pattern has left the center perpetually unstable, with staff and animals bearing the consequences.

Michele Basso was hand-picked by interim director Sally Thompson-Iritani in 2021 despite a decades-long record of disaster: botched monkey surgeries, repeated clashes with veterinarians, and a reputation for disregarding oversight. Predictably, her tenure as director ended in 2024 after continued leadership failures and escalating animal welfare concerns. By July 2025, UW’s Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) unanimously suspended all four of Basso’s protocols, citing her blatant disregard for rules, lack of responsibility, and loss of trust.

Internal communications show Thompson-Iritani and Basso turning on each other as the primate center collapsed around them¹⁴—a constant stream of finger-pointing and blame-shifting while the crisis deepened.¹⁵ This was not a clash of personalities; it was the inevitable outcome of reckless appointments and failed oversight, sanctioned and ignored at the highest levels of UW.

Deborah Fuller served as interim director beginning in mid-2024 until she was announced as the permanent director in late 2024. When Basso was finally removed, Vice Provost Ostendorf made clear in internal communications that she had no intention of conducting a national search for the best candidate. While drafting the leadership change statement with the university’s spokesperson, she wrote on May 31, “I’m worried that ‘recruiting’ in ‘as we work toward recruiting a new director for the primate center’ might suggest that we’ll do a national search, which I’m hoping we don’t

¹⁰ May 31, 2024. Page 51 of the Public Records Release received by PETA on August 13, 2025

¹¹ July 21, 2023. Page 16 of the Public Records Release received by PETA on August 13, 2025

¹² May 24, 2024. Page 283 of the Public Records Release received by PETA on August 13, 2025

¹³ June 21, 2024. Page 9 of the Public Records Release received by PETA on August 13, 2025

¹⁴ May 23, 2024. Pages 285-286 of the Public Records Release received by PETA on August 13, 2025

¹⁵ June 21, 2024. Pages 7-17 of the Public Records Release received by PETA on August 13, 2025

need to do. Maybe ‘as we work on steps to identify a new director’?”.¹⁶ In another email about Fuller, Ostendorf stated, “I would prefer not to do a national search if we can retain her. I am working on that and will be talking to you about it”.¹⁷ She even noted that Fuller was weighing “a very large offer from Wisconsin” with a July 1 deadline, underscoring how leadership decisions at the WaNPRC were apparently driven by expediency and insider negotiations rather than by a transparent search for the best-qualified candidate.¹⁸

Even Fuller herself admitted she was unprepared. On June 4, 2024—just days into her interim role—she confessed to Oregon Health & Science University’s Daniel Streblow: “Michele [Basso] was going to go on leave for a few months anyway and had already asked me to fill in during that time (which I had agreed to). I had no idea, however, until it happened, that it would turn into this and in a sense, this interim role wasn’t really a choice—it fell on me. I have a lot to learn in the next few months to figure things out—for both the Center and me—and I really appreciate your support”.¹⁹

The irony is glaring. In 2023, WaNPRC’s leadership was already trying to shift its Arizona Breeding Colony monkeys onto OHSU’s Oregon National Primate Research Center. By 2024, Fuller herself was reaching out to OHSU officials because she admitted she was overwhelmed and unprepared to run WaNPRC. UW wasn’t just trying to make its monkeys Oregon’s problem—it was also looking to Oregon to prop up the director it had hastily installed.

Fuller’s unpreparedness was not just a matter of personal insecurity—it came at a cost to UW. Having admitted that she nearly left for a lucrative outside offer, it is reasonable to assume UW had to increase her compensation to persuade her to stay. Whatever the final figure, the Regents should recognize that the university is now likely paying a premium for an unwilling and underqualified leader.

At the same time, Fuller reduced the work time she had already committed to her NIH research grants—time she had promised to federally funded science—in order to take the interim director’s job.²⁰ This diversion of grant-supported effort not only shortchanged the research she was obligated to carry out, it also raises profound questions about integrity, accountability, and the misuse of public funds.

Inadequate Staffing

Ostendorf and Basso acknowledged that inadequate staffing is an ongoing issue for WaNPRC. Ostendorf recognized that “staff turnover, recruitment, and retention remain a persistent issue”²¹ and “among other issues at the facility, staffing shortages remain a critical concern.”²² Veterinarians are critical in ensuring adequate animal welfare conditions, and both facilities have consistently lacked veterinary oversight. Referring to the Arizona Breeding Colony, Basso said, “one major problem is the shortage of veterinarians,”²³ explaining that “it is especially challenging

¹⁶ May 31, 2024. Page 120 of the Public Records Release received by PETA on August 13, 2025

¹⁷ May 31, 2024. Page 116 of the Public Records Release received by PETA on August 13, 2025

¹⁸ May 31, 2024. Page 116 of the Public Records Release received by PETA on August 13, 2025

¹⁹ June 4, 2024. Page 117 of the Public Records Release received by PETA on August 13, 2025

²⁰ May 24, 2024. Page 309 of the Public Records Release received by PETA on August 13, 2025

²¹ May 31, 2024. Page 50 of the Public Records Release received by PETA on August 13, 2025

²² May 31, 2024. Page 51 of the Public Records Release received by PETA on August 13, 2025

²³ June 21, 2024. Page 15 of the Public Records Release received by PETA on August 13, 2025

for us due to the remote location of the facility.” Ostendorf acknowledged that “there is an important vet position that has been unfilled for over a year, requiring additional need for emergency coverage. Moreover, strained relations with multiple people in the Office of Research animal welfare have impeded efforts to improve animal care at the facility.”²⁴ Basso admitted there was “insufficient staffing in all areas of the center from administrative to animal husbandry.”²⁵

Ongoing Violations of Animal Welfare Laws

The WaNPRC has a long history of violating the Animal Welfare Act and continues to be cited by the USDA. Monkeys have died after their lungs exploded, suffocated to death, choked on their own vomit, and suffered from radiation toxicity. Federal inspectors have documented 27 separate failures at the Seattle and Arizona facilities over the past decade—ranging from animal escapes to fatal lapses in veterinary care. These are not minor oversights; they are lethal conditions that have caused immense suffering.

Animal welfare concerns were central to the action against Basso, but her removal did not stop the violations. Under Fuller’s leadership, the USDA has continued to cite UW for breaking federal animal welfare laws, including six violations in July 2025 alone.

Conclusion

The record is consistent: the WaNPRC is beset by financial instability, chronic leadership failures, deteriorating facilities, inadequate staffing, and ongoing violations of federal law. To UW’s credit, you acted on our warnings about Michele Basso. But her removal did not address the underlying problems, which remain unresolved.

NIH has made clear that funding for monkey experimentation is diminishing, making long-term funding for monkey facilities increasingly uncertain. With new leadership at UW, the Regents face a decision: continue to underwrite a program that is financially unsustainable and repeatedly out of compliance with federal law, or begin an orderly closure—starting with the Arizona Breeding Colony.

The WaNPRC is no longer a scientific asset. It is an escalating liability. Every day it remains open compounds the risk, the cost, and the reputational damage to this university.

Sincerely,



Lisa Jones-Engel, PhD.
Senior Science Advisor, Primate Experimentation
PETA
LisaJE@peta.org
206-372-6190

²⁴ May 31, 2024 Page 51 of the Public Records Release received by PETA on August 13, 2025

²⁵ May 24, 2024. Page 283 of the Public Records Release received by PETA on August 13, 2025