

RAJA KRISHNAMOORTHY
8TH DISTRICT, ILLINOIS

115 CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515

TELEPHONE: (202) 225-3711
FAX: (202) 225-7830

1701 EAST WOODFIELD ROAD, SUITE 704
SCHAUMBURG, IL 60173

TELEPHONE: (847) 413-1959
FAX: (847) 413-1965

www.krishnamoorthi.house.gov

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

COMMITTEE ON
OVERSIGHT & REFORM
SUBCOMMITTEES:
ECONOMIC & CONSUMER POLICY
CHAIRMAN
ENVIRONMENT
HOUSE PERMANENT SELECT
COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE
SUBCOMMITTEES:
STRATEGIC TECHNOLOGIES &
ADVANCED RESEARCH
INTELLIGENCE MODERNIZATION &
READINESS

October 26, 2021

Mr. Thomas Vilsack
United States Secretary of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave SW
Washington, DC 20250

Mr. Kevin Shea
Administrator of the USDA Animal and Plant Health
Inspection Service
1400 Independence Ave SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack and Administrator Shea,

I am writing to express my concerns regarding recent reports that have found a dramatic decrease in enforcement of the Animal Welfare Act. Specifically, I am concerned with the escape of three zebras from a Maryland farm and the subsequent death of one of them just last week. As the Secretary of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and as the Administrator of the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, you have an obligation to investigate cases of animal abuse and protect animal welfare.

It saddens me to say that better enforcement of the Animal Welfare Act would have prevented the escape of these three zebras, and tragic death of one of them. The owner of these animals Jerry Holly has been cited by the USDA for more than 100 past violations of the Animal Welfare Act, including the failure to maintain fencing around the pastures that contained the zebras.¹ His other violations of the Animal Welfare Act include providing unclean housing, water, and medical care to his animals. As a result of the escape of these zebras, Holly has now been charged by the state's attorney for Prince George's County with three counts of animal cruelty.²

However, as of this date, despite his numerous violations, no action has been taken on a federal level to revoke Holly's Class A USDA breeding license administered through the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS).

This case exemplifies an alarming trend in animal welfare enforcement by the USDA. Between 2015 and 2020, U.S. enforcement action brought against licensed animal facilities fell by 90 percent.³ An Office of the Inspector General Report titled "Animal Care Program Oversight of Dog Breeders" from June of 2021 found that APHIS, which is responsible for enforcement of the AWA, "did not consistently address complaints or adequately document the results of its follow-up."⁴ Additionally, it found data reliability issues with APHIS reports because the agency no longer has a data manager for the APHIS' Animal Care Information System database.⁵ These findings underscore the systemic failure at the agency and the need for a change in the current animal welfare enforcement processes of the USDA.

¹ "Behind The Maryland Zebra Escape Is An Exotic Animal Breeding Business With Dozens of Animal Welfare Violations." *Dcist*. [10/20/21](#).

² "Escaped zebras' owner charged with animal cruelty in Maryland." *Washington Post*. [10/20/21](#).

³ "USDA accused of ignoring welfare violations in favor of business interests." *National Geographic*. [10/13/21](#).

⁴ "Animal Care Program Oversight of Dog Breeders." *Office of Inspector General*. [7/21](#).

⁵ *Ibid*.

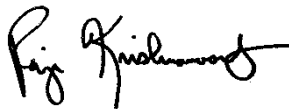
It is essential that the USDA effectively enforce the Animal Welfare Act. I introduced the Animal Welfare Enforcement Improvement Act, which would have ensured that dangerous owners like Holly have their licenses revoked. I urge you to review current practices to ensure that not one more animal is a victim.

Given the above concerns, I request the following information:

1. Why was Jerry Holly allowed to maintain his "Class A breeder" license under the Animal Welfare Act, even after he was cited for multiple violations?
2. Why did U.S. enforcement action brought against licensed animal facilities fall by 90 percent between 2015 and 2020?
3. What is the USDA currently doing to increase the enforcement of the Animal Welfare Act?
4. Would requiring unannounced inspections improve the current problem of relicensing Animal Welfare Act offenders?

I would like a response to this letter by November 9, 2021, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Raja Krishnamoorthi", with a stylized, flowing script.

Raja Krishnamoorthi
Member of Congress