

Animal Care National Meeting Kansas City, Mo. -- April 19-22, 2010

APHIS' Animal Care program came together last week in an effort to further bolster its performance levels. Animal Care's veterinary medical officers and animal care inspectors receive thorough training before they begin their jobs, but this national meeting was an opportunity to reinforce performance standards to all of Animal Care's employees at the same time. By streamlining inspection procedures, improving communication, and clearly articulating expectations, the program will improve its overall consistency in all phases of its day-to-day operations.

Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Kathleen Merrigan addressed the group of 150 employees who are responsible for regulating more than 12,000 facilities, including exhibitors, transporters, research facilities and commercial animal breeders and dealers. Merrigan voiced the Administration's support for Animal Care's mission and thanked the employees for their hard work. She spoke to them about the need for the program to transition to an "age of enforcement," taking a tougher stance on repeat offenders and moving more quickly and consistently in pursuing enforcement actions. Her remarks set the tone for future changes in the program and for the issues to be discussed during the rest of the meeting.

Animal Care used the national meeting to improve its consistency by holding training sessions, sharing best practices and discussing the program's new Inspection Requirements handbook. The Handbook was distributed to all employees and will serve as an essential resource for all field personnel, helping to ensure that inspectors in every state conduct inspections and address non-compliant items in the same way. Likewise, the agency will consistently take enforcement action against non-compliant licensees to achieve the Agency's goal of full compliance with Animal Welfare Act regulations for all its licensees.

The Inspection Requirements Handbook addresses the following subject areas:

- Documenting Inspection Findings—how to address non-compliant items, direct non-compliant items (those items that have a direct impact on an animal's health), and repeat non-compliant items;
- Exit Briefings—inspectors clearly explaining the findings of their inspection with the licensee;
- Inspection Photographs—photographs *must* be taken to document direct non-compliant items, repeat non-compliant items, non-compliant items involved in an ongoing enforcement case, non-compliant items that are likely to be appealed and airline non-compliant items;
- Post Inspection Procedures;
- Attempted Inspections;
- Pre-license Inspections;
- Refusal of Inspection—when a licensee denies an inspector access to a facility;

- Interference—when a licensee interferes with an inspector;
- Correcting, Rescinding and Amending Inspection Reports;
- Canine Care Checklist—to improve consistency in kennel inspections;
- Standard Operating Procedures for Conducting Tracebacks From Random Source B Dealers --to ensure that stolen pets are not being sold to research facilities;
- Inspecting Random Source B Dealers;
- Big Cat Safety Tips [lions, tigers, etc.];
- 7060s—warnings to licensees;
- Stipulations—monetary fines for non-compliant licensees;
- USDA's Office of General Counsel Prosecutions;
- Risk-based Inspection System Revisions;
- Inspection Rating System.

Animal Care also unveiled its updated Animal Care Information System (ACIS), which will make the inspection process more efficient in documenting non-compliant items, tracking the frequency of inspections and generating inspection reports that will automatically be posted to the program's website.

Employees attended training sessions highlighting the newest developments in numerous issues relevant to their jobs. Increased understanding of these topics will aid them in their day-to-day performance. Topics included: recognizing pain and distress in animals, husbandry and nutrition, common problems faced by inspectors, emergency programs, procedures for confiscating suffering animals, and the benefits to socially housing animals in facilities. Sessions on administrative topics included an Animal Care budget update and an overview of the program's public affairs support function. The meeting also included a hands-on demonstration by APHIS' safety officer, who showed inspectors how to detect the warning signs for when a licensee may turn violent and how to conduct themselves in a dangerous situation.

There were presentations from external stakeholders, including Dr. Lila Miller, a high-ranking official from the ASPCA. She spoke to the group about the topic of animal shelter medicine. Dr. Axel Wolff, with the National Institutes of Health' Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare, also addressed the meeting. He provided information on his organization -- stressing that animals kept in their appropriate physical and physiological states are not only healthier than other animals, but they also allow researchers to get better results when conducting their studies.

The meeting was an opportunity to bring together Animal Care's geographically-dispersed staff in one location to strengthen communication and consistency in its operations. The information shared at last week's meeting will go a long way toward improving Animal Care's ability to achieve its mission and accomplish new goals.