

Research chimps may be headed from lab to leisure

January 23 2013, by Janet McConnaughey



This is an August 2004 aerial file photo of the 200-acre site in Caddo Parish near Shreveport, La., where the first phase of construction on Chimp Haven is underway. The NIH Council of Councils Working Group on Tuesday Jan. 22, 2013 approved a proposal, which also calls for major cuts in grants to study chimps in laboratories and no return to breeding them for research. Government scientists have agreed that all but 50 of hundreds of chimpanzees kept for federally funded research should be retired from labs and sent to the national sanctuary. (AP Photo/Chimp Haven, Naomi Lopez-Bauman)

(AP)—Chimpanzees who have spent their lives in U.S. research labs being prodded, poked and tested may be headed for retirement in a leafy sanctuary where they can climb trees, socialize at will, play with toys and even listen to music.

More than 300 [chimpanzees](#) should be retired from government-funded research and sent to live in a sprawling refuge outfitted with play areas under a recommendation approved Tuesday by a top national panel of scientists.

The proposal from a National Institutes of [Health committee](#) is the latest step in a gradual shift away from using chimps as [test subjects](#), because of technological advances and because of [ethical concerns](#) about their close relation to humans. It would affect all but 50 of more than 350 chimpanzees in labs around the country. The remaining group kept for future federally funded research would have to be housed in spacious conditions laid down in the detail by the committee.

The NIH Council of Councils Working Group proposal, which will go to the agency's director after a 60-day period for public comment, also calls for major cuts in grants to study chimps in laboratories and no return to breeding them for research.

The chimpanzees would be sent to a national sanctuary, Chimp Haven, that opened in 2005 to house former federal research chimps on a 200-acre (81-hectare) site in rural northwest Louisiana.

Under an agreement made late last year, before the proposal, nine chimpanzees arrived Tuesday at Chimp Haven from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's New Iberia Research Center, which no longer has an NIH chimp research contract. Seven more are expected Thursday and another 95 will arrive over the coming months, sanctuary officials said.

After decades of being taken from cages to be poked and prodded, they'll be part of larger social groups with changing access to forest habitats, play yards, courtyards and jungle gyms.

They'll get a daily assortment of fresh fruits and vegetables along with their nutritionally balanced biscuits. They'll have toys to play with, from balls and backpacks to anything else that's safe and might amuse them—one Christmas, they got donated books—and even concerts. Drummers and other musicians have been brought in to play for them, and administrative associate Steve Snodgrass sometimes plays "lyrical" Irish fiddle tunes.

"They're very attentive. They are calm, and it seems to soothe them," he said Wednesday.

The animals that arrived Tuesday—eight females and a male between ages 29 and 52—made up one group housed together at New Iberia, and those scheduled Thursday made up another such social group, said Chimp Haven spokeswoman Ashley Gordon. They include a 2-year-old female and 3-year-old male born in New Iberia and coming with their mothers.

Once their quarantine period is over and the sanctuary's behaviorist and veterinary staff have had a chance to get to know them, they'll be put in a "howdy"—a fenced-off part of a larger living area—to become acquainted with the group that seems the best match for them. Once they seem to be getting along well across the barrier, it will be removed.

The federal agency said in 2011 that it would phase out most invasive research on chimpanzees because advances in science have made most such studies unnecessary and, as director Francis Collins put it, the great apes' similarity to people "demands special consideration and respect."

The new 86-page recommendation describes how chimpanzees should be kept and what will be needed for any future research. [Chimps](#) should be used only if there is no other way to study a threat to human health, and the research should be approved by an independent committee with members from the public, said the Council of Councils.

Animal-rights activists said they were pleased by the recommendations.

"At last, our federal government understands: A chimpanzee should no more live in a laboratory than a human should live in a phone booth," the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals said in a statement.

Kathleen Conlee, the Humane Society of the United States' vice president for animal research issues, said she was disappointed by the recommendation to keep a group of about 50 in case further research on chimpanzees is approved.

"But I'm glad they made clear those animals should be kept to much higher standards than they are currently being kept in," she said.

Research chimpanzees should be kept in groups of at least seven, with about 1,000 square feet (93 square meters) of outdoor space per chimp, according to the proposal.

The space must include year-round outdoor access with a variety of natural surfaces such as grass, dirt and mulch, and enough climbing space to let all members of large troupes travel, feed and rest well above the ground, and with material to let them build new nests each day, the report said.

A \$30 million cap on total spending for construction and care of Chimp Haven's retirees has been looming. That would stop NIH from contributing 75 percent of the \$13,000 annual cost to care for each

federal chimpanzee.

Conlee said the Humane Society will urge Congress to move money now spent on research contracts to Chimp Haven. The sanctuary gives the animals better care for less money than the labs are paid, she said.

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