

Monkey farms in Florida under scrutiny from officials

May 12 2015, by Tamara Lush

Tucked away in Florida's Hendry County, amid the scrub brush and saw palmetto grasslands just southwest of Lake Okeechobee, are three monkey breeding farms containing thousands of primates.

A fourth is in the works, and the possibility that the small, rural county will become the country's biggest supplier of research primates has some neighbors and many animal rights activists howling.

"Who would want this? This is a black eye in our community. What community wants to be known as a place that's breeding monkeys?" said BJ Gerald, a retired horse trainer who lives a few miles from one of the breeding facilities.

The companies say they're doing nothing wrong, that they're properly permitted agriculture facilities and they're in the area with the blessing of authorities.

Animal welfare activists say they're determined to fight the facilities, one of which keeps 95 percent of its monkeys in outdoor caging.

In November, the Animal Legal Defense Fund filed a lawsuit against Hendry County officials who approved a primate breeding facility that could hold as many as 3,200 long-tailed macaques, a species linked to outbreaks of infectious disease. The lawsuit said Hendry County approved the controversial project behind closed doors with only the facility's supporters present and failed to hold the public hearing

required by the state's Sunshine Law.

"The process has been very secretive," said ALDF lawyer Justine Cowan. "The county is there to serve the community and not the primate facility. Why are they digging their heels in and refusing to engage the public in this process?"

That court case is pending. Hendry County officials refused to comment on monkey farms or the lawsuit.

The monkey business is lucrative. At Primate Products, one of Hendry's breeding facilities, the company uses two species of macaques from China, Cambodia, Mauritius or Vietnam. The animals are quarantined upon arriving in the U.S.

Primate Products then breeds the monkeys for resale and distribution to research institutions, pharmaceutical companies, and the federal government, according to a company spokesman. The monkeys sell for about \$3,200 each.

Activists and residents say that the facilities shouldn't be covered under the county's agricultural zoning regulations. Monkeys, they say, are very different from cows or horses.

"Unlike domestic livestock, non-human primates are known carriers of a wide array of serious infectious diseases such as Ebola, Herpes B, tuberculosis, and parasites that may be transmitted to humans," wrote Cowan in the complaint.

Dr. Jim Wellehan, a professor at the University of Florida veterinary school, says monkeys don't "carry" Ebola, but are "susceptible" to getting it, just like humans. It would be unlikely for a captive population of monkeys—say, in a zoo or research breeding setting—to contract the

deadly virus, he said.

He added that while tuberculosis is a "concern" in macaque monkeys, state regulations require facilities and licensed owners of such primates to undergo routine testing. Herpes B is carried only by macaques, and requires direct contact—such as a bite—for transmission. Wellehan says that without escapes there shouldn't be human risk, and testing isn't required.

SoFloAg has no phone numbers or email addresses listed in public records so the company couldn't be contacted. Rock Aboujaoude, a local engineer and consultant who helped build the facility, said the owners "don't want their private names out" because of threats from animal welfare activists.

"They keep the animals in the best possible shape," Aboujaoude said.

Animal activists don't agree. They've demonstrated and attended local government meetings—where they said they weren't allowed to speak during one session. Former CNN TV show host Jane Velez-Mitchell attended a rally and has been writing on her website about the facilities, calling for a ban on primate imports into the U.S. and a moratorium on building new monkey farms.

The latest protest, on Tuesday, consisted of a group handing out literature at a regional economic development summit.

"The advertisement for this summit was, five counties, one heart. Well, Hendry County is creating a heart attack for us by illegally approving two new massive laboratory monkey facilities without any public hearings," said Madeleine Doran, a protest organizer.

Two of the farms—Primate Products Inc. and The Haman Ranch—are

also under scrutiny from county officials.

In the past two months, officials asked both facilities to explain what they do with the "nonhuman primates" on the property, and whether they perform research, tests or experiments on them.

On March 27, county officials sent a letter to Primate Products, saying that annual inspection reports from the United States Department of Agriculture show the company appears to be performing experiments on the monkeys—which would violate the county's rules and fall outside the scope of the agricultural zoning.

The county sent a similar letter April 7 to The Haman Ranch, which is owned by the Homestead, Florida-based nonprofit Mannheimer Foundation. The foundation declined comment.

USDA documents report that Primate Products performed an average of three tests or experiments on monkeys a day in 2014. Animal welfare activists say the facility removes dead fetuses via C-section abortions from female primates, then sells the fetuses and extracted primate breast milk.

Thomas Rowell, president of Primate Products, wrote in an email that the animals at the facility are "used for breeding and are eventually redistributed for use in biomedical research which aims at advancing public health." He said the details about the abortions and breast milk were true, but wouldn't provide further details.

Rowell said the [monkeys](#) are treated ethically and blamed opposition on outside activists.

"Hendry County and the community have been very supportive of PPI's mission for over 15 years," wrote Rowell.

Hendry County officials are expected to rule on the investigations within a few weeks.

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Citation: Monkey farms in Florida under scrutiny from officials (2015, May 12) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-05-monkey-farms-florida-scrutiny.html>

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