

From lab to sanctuary: 220 research chimps being relocated (Update)

May 3 2016, by By Janet McConnaughey

All 220 chimpanzees at a Louisiana university's research lab in New Iberia will be moving to a new sanctuary in north Georgia, the university said Monday, in what appears to be a first for a non-federal lab.

The great apes owned by the University of Louisiana at Lafayette will be moved monthly in social groups of about 10 animals to the sanctuary in Blue Ridge, Georgia, starting in June, said Sarah Baeckler Davis, co-founder of the nonprofit Project Chimps.

A joint announcement Tuesday by the university and Project Chimps said it was the first time a non-federal research program has arranged to release all of its research chimps.

The Humane Society of the United States confirmed it.

"I know there have been some chimps here and there, but nothing on this scale," said Kathleen Conlee, the Humane Society's vice president for animal research issues. "So this is truly momentous."

Michael Budkie, executive director of an animal rights group called Stop Animal Exploitation Now, was less effusive in his praise.

"It is high time that the 220 chimps at the University of Louisiana are retired, and it is a positive step that ULL is shouldering at least part of the financial burden for these primates," he said in a prepared statement. "But what about ... the other 5,000 primates at ULL?"

USDA records show the New Iberia Research Center also has 4,818 rhesus monkeys, 621 vervets, 349 crab-eating macaques, 308 pigtailed macaques, and 20 capuchin monkeys, Budkie said in an interview.

University spokesman Charlie Bier did not respond directly, saying the university was referring all questions to its news release and frequently asked questions webpage about the chimpanzees.

The groups said the university and the Humane Society are contributing to the effort, and Project Chimps is soliciting donations. Baeckler Davis said they've spent about \$3 million so far, and expect that when the sanctuary reaches full capacity expenses will be about \$5 million a year.

"We estimate it will probably be an \$80 million project over the course of its lifetime," she said.

The facility was formerly a sanctuary for gorillas that could not be kept in zoos. It was built for a dozen or more gorillas but never held more than three, founder Steuart Dewar said in an email. One of those, owned by the zoo in Birmingham, Alabama, died of old age; the other two returned to Zoo Atlanta in 2014, he said.

Dewar said Project Chimps bought the land and the Dewar Wildlife Trust donated the buildings and enclosures, which meet "very demanding standards" needed for certification by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums.

The university said it's been planning retirement and sanctuary for its chimpanzees for more than two years, and "the vast majority" were never part of any research. It says all were retired last year, and all have daily access to outdoor play areas and natural sunlight.

Only 82 other lab chimps in the U.S. are privately owned and funded: 26

at the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Bastrop, Texas, and 56 at the Yerkes lab in Georgia, according to the Humane Society.

It said 308 owned by the National Institutes of Health are at two labs in Texas and one in New Mexico, and NIH supports another 82 at one of the Texas labs.

NIH retired most of its chimps in 2013, but held 50 on standby until 2015, when it said they would be retired, too.

Chimp Haven in north Louisiana is the official sanctuary for NIH chimps, though most remain in three labs in Texas and New Mexico.

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