

USDA removes animal welfare reports from its website

February 3 2017, by Mary Clare Jalonick

The Agriculture Department has removed animal welfare inspection reports, enforcement records and other information about the treatment of animals from its website, citing privacy and other laws.

Tanya Espinosa, a spokeswoman for USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, said the information was removed from the site around 11 a.m. Friday. She would not say if the removal was temporary or permanent in the new Trump administration.

The information is used by [advocacy groups](#) and other members of the public to look up information on commercial dog and horse breeders, some of whom have had a history of abuse. The reports included lists of animal welfare violations at those facilities and also at animal testing labs, and whether those violations have been corrected.

In place of the online database is a new message from the department saying it is "implementing actions to remove documents" related to the Animal Welfare Act and the Horse Protection Act that contain [personal information](#).

The records have been removed "based on our commitment to being transparent, remaining responsive to our stakeholders' informational needs, and maintaining the privacy rights of individuals," the online message says.

The statement said the documents will still be available through Freedom

of Information Act requests, which can be costly for the general public and sometimes take months or years to obtain.

Advocacy groups said the lack of documentation of violations would immediately affect their work.

"What the USDA has done is given cover to people who neglect or harm animals and get cited by USDA inspectors," said John Goodwin, who runs the Stop Puppy Mills Campaign at The Humane Society of the United States. "The public is no longer going to know which commercial dog breeders, horse trainers, which zoos, which research labs have horrible [animal welfare](#) track records."

As justification, the online notice cites ongoing court decisions and guidance from the Department of Justice regarding privacy and Freedom of Information laws. The notice does not cite any specific cases or guidance, and a spokesman for the Department of Justice referred questions back to the department.

The message says the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, which maintains the records, with the support of the department's Office of General Counsel, "continuously monitors these sources of information and makes refinements to APHIS' practices, as needed."

It wasn't immediately clear what personal information is at issue. Some of the reports already redact locations of facilities to protect privacy.

The move comes two days after Rep. Ken Calvert, R-Calif., introduced a bill to require more public [information](#) on animal testing. The bill is backed by a group called the White Coat Waste Project, which seeks to reduce the amount of federal dollars spent on that testing.

"There was already before today a disturbing lack of transparency in

how animals are used," said Justin Goodman, a vice president for the group.

© 2017 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: USDA removes animal welfare reports from its website (2017, February 3) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-02-usda-animal-welfare-website.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.