



Surplus Chimps Stranded in Research Controversy

Shannon Brownlee Special to The Washington Post

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Deep in the New Mexico desert, there's a state-of-the-art facility at Holloman Air Force Base. It does not house fighter jets, but instead serves as home to about 300 chimpanzees. The animals make up about half of the chimps owned by the **Coulston** Foundation, the largest primate research laboratory in the world.

The Alamogordo, N.M., facility has long been embroiled in controversy, having been repeatedly accused of mismanaging the care of the animals in its custody.

Since 1995, the Agriculture Department, one of the federal entities charged with ensuring the safety and welfare of animals used in biomedical research, has investigated and brought charges against **Coulston's** lab on three occasions for violations of the Animal Welfare Act, ranging from inadequate veterinary care to negligence resulting in the deaths of at least nine chimpanzees. Another investigation is underway.

The controversy came to a head last week, when the National Institutes of Health took title to 288 chimpanzees at the facility.

Given the foundation's record, relieving it of half of its chimps might seem like a good idea. But instead of relief, there was frustration among many, including animal welfare advocates, federal officials and the directors of other primate laboratories.

That's because, despite the NIH action, the animals remain at the facility. And there's nowhere else to send hundreds of other animals around the country that are no longer needed for research.

The NIH has funneled at least \$10 million into the **Coulston** Foundation since 1993, despite the charges leveled at **Coulston's** facility by other federal agencies. Some researchers, as well as animal advocates, believe that the NIH has been propping up the troubled lab because the agency does not want to deal with a larger issue: what to do with several hundred chimpanzees that are no longer needed for biomedical research.

"If these were mice, there wouldn't be a problem," says Tom Gordon, interim director of the Yerkes Regional Primate Research Center at Emory University in Atlanta, one of several facilities that has more chimps than it needs.

The glut of chimps began in 1986, when the NIH and other federal agencies launched a breeding program to ensure there would be enough animals for research, particularly

AIDS studies. By the time the agencies realized that chimps were not good models for AIDS, there were approximately 1,800 of them scattered in half a dozen U.S. labs. At the same time, money for chimp research and the animals' long-term care was evaporating. Keeping a chimp in a research lab can cost as much as \$1 million over the animal's 50-year life span.

The NIH, however, has expressed little interest in retiring any chimps permanently, especially to sanctuaries that would be run by animal advocates. NIH officials worry they won't have ready access to animals should they be needed for research. "God knows what disease is going to pop up next," says John Strandberg, director of comparative medicine at the National Center for Research Resources, a division of NIH that paid for chimpanzee breeding. Yet many animals are infected with either HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, hepatitis, or both, making them unsuitable for experiments involving other diseases.

Enter the **Coulston** Foundation, which by 1995 had acquired 650 chimpanzees at a time when other laboratories were looking to unload them. By then, **Coulston** had obtained the lease to the \$10 million facility at Holloman, where more than 100 descendants of the "space chimps" used in NASA tests in the 1960s were housed.

The foundation ran into trouble from the start. Three chimps died when a heater in their room malfunctioned and pushed the temperature to 140 degrees. Four years later, a 2-year-old chimp named Echo died during an operation performed by inexperienced veterinarians.

By the time the foundation had agreed to relinquish its animals in an agreement with the Agriculture Department last September, the **Coulston** facility had been charged with negligence in the deaths of nine chimps and four monkeys. In each case, **Coulston** agreed to pay fines while admitting no wrongdoing. Officials are investigating the deaths of more chimps, according to In Defense of Animals, an advocacy group.

Through it all, the NIH has maintained that it had no cause for concern. Last week, Strandberg blamed **Coulston's** troubles on bad public relations. "If you look at USDA concerns, they are looking at wall surfaces, and record-keeping," he said.

But internal NIH documents show that the agency has long been aware of far more serious problems and ignored them, according to animal welfare advocates.

In February 1988, the Association for Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care International (AAALAC) inspected the **Coulston** facility. AAALAC accreditation is one way a lab can demonstrate it is caring for animals properly to obtain federal funding. Another is for the lab to ensure the animals' welfare through an internal committee that reviews all experiments.

The foundation, which has been chronically short of cash, failed on both counts. It was rejected by AAALAC in 1998. In 1999, the Food and Drug Administration and then the Agriculture Department found serious fault with the foundation's review committee, saying it was simply rubber-stamping experiments, including at least one that was likely to lead to long-term injury to animals. Problems with the committee, said Don McKinney, a **Coulston** spokesman, were "corrected immediately."

According to In Defense of Animals, NIH funding of **Coulston** violated federal law and U.S. Public Health Service policy. Without AAALAC accreditation, or a functioning review committee, In Defense of Animals says, federal law states that the NIH director "shall suspend or revoke" funding. Yet since last year, the NIH has awarded the lab at least \$2.8 million in "supplemental awards" and research contracts. In a written statement, a spokesman for the NIH said that **Coulston** can continue receiving funds because "in each instance [of] noncompliance . . . corrective action has been taken."

Events came to a head late last month, when animal advocates came to Rep. John Edward Porter (R-Ill.), a staunch NIH supporter, with a plan to take over half of **Coulston's** chimps and turn the facility at Holloman into a sanctuary. The NIH rushed to take possession of the chimps last week.

The agency does not yet know how it will care for the animals. It also does not have a new management team in place, leaving **Coulston** in charge in the interim.

The NIH move also throws into question the fate of several hundred other chimps. In response to recommendations by the National Academy of Sciences, the NIH adopted a Chimp Management Plan, which calls for \$4.2 million a year to care for 600 chimps. Strandberg said the 288 animals obtained from **Coulston** will be part of that plan, which several lab directors hope will take care of their surplus animals. The Yerkes center, for example, needs a home for nearly 100 chimps. Another NIH spokesman said money for the **Coulston** animals will come from other sources.

On Thursday, the House Commerce subcommittee on health and environment will hold a hearing on surplus chimps. Animal advocates, including famed primate researcher Jane Goodall, who is scheduled to testify, support retiring surplus animals permanently in sanctuaries. Some scientists have come to agree. "Going from crisis to crisis is not ideal," said Gordon, the Yerkes center director. "We need a national plan."

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