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COMMITTEE ON
WAYS AND MEANS

SUBCOMMITTEE ON
HUMAN RESOURCES

SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-2208

May 7, 2018

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue:

Thank you for your recent multi-stop visit to Michigan and support for our state's farmers and ranchers. I am grateful for your interest in our local concerns as you consider the nation's agricultural priorities and work to ensure the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) efficiency and effectiveness.

I write today to express concerns about potential waste and abuse related to terminal research on kittens being conducted at a USDA Agricultural Research Service (ARS) facility.

According to documents reviewed by my office, "Toxoplasmosis in cats" (Animal Use Protocol #15-018) is a research project being conducted at the USDA's Animal Parasitic Diseases Laboratory in Beltsville, Maryland. This experiment involves breeding hundreds of kittens, feeding them Toxoplasma-infected raw meat for 2-3 weeks, collecting their feces during this time to harvest parasites, and then killing the kittens and discarding them by "incineration."

As you can imagine, I was shocked to hear that the USDA, the very organization set out to enforce animal welfare laws and regulations, was treating the life of animals with such contempt. In order to better understand the history of this experiment and the protocol surrounding it, I would be grateful if you would provide my office with answers to the following questions:

- **Project history:** The current protocol was first approved in May 2015, and USDA recently stated that the project was still active as of last month. Our review indicates that this research has been conducted at USDA since at least 1982. In what year was the original kitten breeding protocol first approved and how many times has it been renewed?
- **Total cost to taxpayers:** Experts note that the use of cats for these studies is expensive and difficult. How much has the USDA spent on the current kitten breeding protocol? How much has been spent since the original version of the protocol?

- **Number of kittens and cats used:** The current protocol calls for the use of 100 kittens each year. Over the lifetime of this project, including the current protocol and earlier versions, how many cats and kittens have been used and killed in this research?
- **Inaccurate pain reporting:** Documents released by USDA show that the oversight committee approved a version of the protocol in 2015 in which researchers significantly underreported the amount of pain and distress that would be caused to the kittens. As a result, the project underwent a less stringent review and researchers were not required to seek alternatives to reduce or replace animal use. The reporting problem was corrected in 2017, however, the Annual Reports filed by this lab for FY16 and FY17 still mis-categorize the cat use in pain category C, indicating little to no pain or distress. When will corrections be submitted for these official reports to ensure accurate information is publicly available?
- **Kitten adoption:** The USDA protocol indicates that “cats fed toxoplasma-infected tissues usually do not become sick,” and veterinary authorities state that toxoplasmosis in kittens and cats is treatable with a course of antibiotics. Given that the kittens being used are not sick and are treatable, why does the protocol call for them to be killed after 2 weeks rather than treated and adopted out to employees or other taxpayers who have funded the research? Does the USDA have a policy or procedure to allow for the adoption of animals no longer needed for research?
- **Alternatives to kitten tests:** USDA states, “Toxoplasma oocysts cannot be produced in cell culture or any other animal species.” Elsewhere, scientists have reported on work to develop technology to replace cat use. What efforts, if any, has USDA engaged in to create more efficient and humane alternatives to the use of cats and other live animals for producing toxoplasma oocysts? Are there currently any underway? Please specify details of any such projects.
- **Protocol renewal:** It appears that the current protocol expires in late May 2018, but that the project has been re-approved for decades. Will the current project be reauthorized for another 3 years when it expires at the end of May?

I understand that currently cats are the only animals in which toxoplasma oocysts can be produced, however, it appears that this project uses kittens as test tubes. Put simply, it creates life to destroy life. While I support the objective of making food safer and protecting people and animals from infectious diseases, we must ensure taxpayer dollars are used effectively, efficiently, and humanely.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,



Michael D. Bishop
Member of Congress