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“Congress shall make no law ...abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press ...”

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OUR VIEW

A paper tiger

USDA cited Sandstone owner of underfed tigers — and never followed up before attack

On April 6, 2006, Cynthia Gamble, a Sandstone big cat owner who provided exotic animals for Hollywood movies, was killed and partially devoured by one of her tigers. Authorities reported the cats were severely malnourished and the tiger that killed her was 100 pounds underweight.

Less than a year earlier, on May 18, 2005, the United States Department of Agriculture inspected Gamble's facility. It cited her for failing to prove the animals were "being fed an adequate diet."

And that's all the agency did, according to documents obtained by the News Tribune editorial page under the Freedom of Information Act.

"They didn't go back and check?" Tammy Quist, another big cat caregiver who took in two of Gamble's emaciated tigers, said when told of the documents last week. "Isn't the USDA as at fault [as Gamble] for these animals being starved?"

Though the agency is charged with upholding the Animal Welfare Act and has a specific office called "Investigative and Enforcement Services," in practice, enforcement is a secondary concern. That certainly seems true regarding the agency's most notorious cases in Minnesota — a state with a disproportionately high number of tiger incidents that hasn't been abated by a 2005 state law requiring exotic animal owners to register their charges with local authorities.

In addition to records on Gamble's facility, USDA inspectors compiled reams of documents going back to 2002 about the traveling carnival exhibitor involved in the deaths of four newborn tiger cubs in Duluth last summer. Before Marcus Cook arrived



PHOTO COURTESY OF WILDCAT SANCTUARY

ABOVE: Lily, one of several emaciated Bengal tigers at the now-defunct Center for Endangered Cats in Sandstone, Minn., where owner Cynthia Gamble was killed in an attack by one of the cats in 2006, explores her new home at the Wildcat Sanctuary, also in Sandstone.

RIGHT: An inspection report from the United States Department of Agriculture cites Gamble for failing to provide records showing she was adequately feeding her cats.

ABOVE RIGHT: The shuttered site of the Center for Endangered Cats today.

in Duluth with his male and very-pregnant female "royal white tigers" in tow, the USDA had issued a lengthy complaint against his Zoo Dynamics operation near Dallas, Texas, where a worker was mauled in 2006. The Attorney General of Texas also acted against Cook, obtaining a judgment enjoining him from exhibiting animals. In interviews with the News Tribune last summer, Cook disputed the charges and conditions of the judgment, as well as any wrongdoing in either case.

Whatever his responsibility or even complete exoneration, few words are forthcoming from the USDA, which declines comment on ongoing investigations or even if one is being conducted.

"We can't comment beyond what's in the inspection report," USDA spokeswoman Jessica Milteer said Friday about the agency's action, or inaction, in the Gamble case.

Quist said she wasn't surprised.

"They seem to be a permitting agency but not an enforce-

ment agency," she said.

That understanding is shared by Keith Streff, director of investigations for the Animal Humane Society in the Twin Cities. "Unless conditions are really egregious, the USDA will not take aggressive action. They like to relegate that to local authorities," he said.

Among those are county sheriffs, and through state legislation, the nonprofit Humane Society. Streff said he received earlier complaints about underfed animals at Gamble's facility and acted to



NEWS TRIBUNE

have her correct it.

"My last contact was 2003," he said. "I don't even know when I was dealing with her if we were dealing with the same cats."

If the USDA isn't in the enforcement business, fine. But then why does it have an inspection team — albeit a woefully inadequate one, of less than 100 inspectors for the entire country? And why does it license animal exhibitors in the first place, giving them a presumed official imprimatur of acceptable animal care and safety in the minds of the public?

"I have a driver's license, but if I break the laws, I can't drive," Quist said. "They're supposed to educate and do their best for enforcement."

And ironically, Quist's sanctuary — home to dozens of cats ranging from servals to cougars to two of Gamble's tigers (the one involved in the attack was immediately put down) — has no USDA license.

"To have a license, you must commercially breed or sell or exhibit the animals," she said, explaining her sanctuary does none of those activities. "That's the problem. We don't get inspected."

Neither do untold numbers of other big cat owners in Minnesota. It may not matter, however: A USDA inspection didn't stop the Gamble tragedy.

USDA		United States Department of Agriculture	Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service	JUN 01 2005
CYNTHIA GAMBLE CENTER FOR ENDANGERED CATS		Customer ID: 28743 Certificate: 41-C-0171		28743 cust_id 244228 insp_id 32283 site_id
56338 DUXBURY RD SANDSTONE, MN 55072		Site: 001 CENTER FOR ENDANGERED		INSPECTION REPORT
2.126 (a)(2)		Inspection Type: ROUTINE INSPECTION		Date: MAY-18-2005
ACCESS AND INSPECTION OF RECORDS AND PROPERTY.				
To examine records required to be kept by the Act and the regulations in this part.				
The animal inventory approved large feline diet and program of veterinary care were not available at the time of inspection.				
The records need to be made available for APHIS Official's to review at each inspection to allow APHIS Officials to accurately track animals and ensure that they are being fed an adequate diet and receiving adequate veterinary care to ensure their health and wellbeing.				
Provide for that records are available during inspections.				
Correct immediately. This affects 4 animals indirectly.				
Last Inspection: 28 December 2004				
End of report.				