



Animals at Chimp Haven in Louisiana, where activists would like retired NIH research chimps to be sent.

ANIMAL RESEARCH

NIH faces chimp housing quandary

Dozens of chimpanzees retired from research may have to continue to live in lab-like conditions.

BY MEREDITH WADMAN

It is not easy to find living space for a great ape at short notice, let alone more than 100 of them. Yet that is precisely the problem that administrators at the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) are scrambling to solve, as the biomedical agency takes its most visible and decisive step away from invasive research on chimpanzees.

Scrutiny of the NIH's chimp research enterprise has been intensifying since the release last December of an Institute of Medicine report, which declared most of the invasive chimp studies to be scientifically unnecessary (see *Nature* 480, 424–425; 2011). The agency, based in Bethesda, Maryland, immediately put a moratorium on new grant applications for work involving chimps. In January 2013, a working group will recommend which of the grants already in progress should continue to be funded. The group will also advise on how many research-eligible chimps the agency should maintain

for current and future use, and where they should be housed.

On 21 September, NIH director Francis Collins declared the 110 agency-owned chimps at the New Iberia Research Center, which is part of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, “permanently ineligible” for research. The move followed the centre’s decision a month earlier not to reapply for a key contract that has supported the NIH chimps housed there for decades. The existing NIH contract with the facility expires in August 2013, leaving the agency little time to avert a housing crisis for animals that can live for up to 60 years in captivity.

The problem presented by the New Iberia chimps is just the first manifestation of a bigger conundrum. The federal government owns or supports 670 chimpanzees, many of which were bred between 1986 and 1995, when it was hoped — incorrectly, as it turned out — that they would be a useful model

for HIV/AIDS. Although some have been used in virology studies and in the development of monoclonal antibodies, their use by federal researchers now looks set to dwindle.

Critics say that the housing problem should have been addressed long ago. “This is emblematic of the NIH’s failure to plan,” says Eric Kleiman, a research consultant for the Animal Welfare Institute in Washington DC. “The writing has been on the wall for how many years now?”

Collins announced the withdrawal of the 110 chimps from research in personal calls to British primatologist and chimp-welfare activist Jane Goodall, and Wayne Pacelle, director of the Humane Society of the United States in Washington DC. They were pleased with the news, but not with the NIH’s plans for housing many of the chimps. Collins said he would move 10–20 animals to fill available space at Chimp Haven in Keithville, Louisiana, the only federally supported chimpanzee sanctuary. The rest would go to the Texas Biomedical Research Institute in San Antonio, where each social group of four to six chimps would be housed in an indoor–outdoor enclosure about the size of a squash court, with extra space for elevated perches.

Chimp advocates say that Chimp Haven, a forested 80-hectare refuge that is currently home to 124 chimps, could accommodate the animals in more appropriate conditions than the research institute. “There is no comparison between a place like Chimp Haven and Texas Biomed,” says Kleiman. “Chimp Haven is chimpanzee-centred. Texas Biomed is a lab. It’s caging.”

“In a perfect world, we would absolutely like to move all of the chimps directly to Chimp Haven,” says Kathy Hudson, NIH deputy director for science, outreach and policy. “We are working collaboratively with Chimp Haven to try to figure out what are the options for being able to do that.” Managers at Chimp Haven say that they could house all 110 animals if they received US\$2.55 million to pay for shovel-ready construction projects that could be completed in four months.

But the NIH faces a ticking clock and a number of roadblocks. Perhaps the most daunting is the language of the 12-year-old federal law that established Chimp Haven. Although it obliges the government to provide ‘lifetime’ care for retired research chimpanzees, it also caps at \$30 million the money that the NIH’s parent agency, the Department of Health and Human Services, can spend in doing so. Chimp Haven, which began receiving government funds in 2002, is expected to hit the \$30 million cap during 2013.

Hudson says that the agency is looking at all alternatives, including finding space in other private sanctuaries and asking the New Iberia centre to keep some animals for the short term. If expanded to full capacity, Chimp Haven says that it could eventually house around 430 chimps. ■

A. FULTZ/CHIMP HAVEN