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March 18, 2024

Memorandum of Opposition to HF4065

Dear Chairperson Samantha Vang and Esteemed Members of the House Agriculture, Finance and Policy Committee,

The Animal Legal Defense Fund, the nation's preeminent legal advocacy organization for animals, and its members in Minnesota, appreciate the opportunity to submit this testimony is strong opposition to HF4065, a bill to exempt facilities accredited by the Zoological Association of America (ZAA) from the state's current import restrictions on live cervidae. The Animal Legal Defense Fund similarly opposed an attempt to exempt ZAA facilities from Minnesota's law restricting the possession of wild animals in 2022. The Legislature should likewise reject this bill as ZAA facilities have consistently been found to be lacking in strong welfare and public safety standards and thus pose a risk to public health.

Currently, Minnesota law provides an exemption for the interstate transfer of cervids between two facilities accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). This bill would add ZAA accredited facilities to this exemption, greatly undermining the purpose and strength of the law. Unfortunately, accreditation by the AZA and accreditation by the ZAA have vastly different meanings. Accreditation by the AZA, an established zoo trade organization that represents some of the most well-respected zoos in the country (including the Minnesota Zoo), ensures that facilities employ the highest standards of animal care and public safety when possessing and exhibiting otherwise dangerous wild animals. The AZA has been the top accrediting body for zoos and aquariums since 1924.

The ZAA has no affiliation with the AZA and is notorious for its subpar safety standards and accreditation of various mismanaged facilities. Established in 2005, the ZAA accredits approximately 60 facilities across the country, many of which allow for public contact with dangerous animals like big cat cubs, bears, and primates. Unlike the AZA, the ZAA has minimal and outdated standards set for safety, personnel training, and veterinary requirements for its accredited facilities. Unfortunately, due to these low accreditation standards, there have been many documented instances of attacks, escapes, animal welfare violations, and animal deaths, at ZAA accredited facilities across the country.

For example, in 2015 the USDA brought an enforcement action against the owner and manager of three affiliated ZAA accredited facilities in Virginia for egregious Animal Welfare Act (AWA) violations. These violations included the drowning of a Parma Wallaby, instead of complying with proper veterinary and euthanasia requirements, and housing a Spider Monkey in sub-freezing temperatures without proper shelter and failing to provide proper veterinary care for the animal's resulting injuries. There have also been accounts of animals escaping during transfers and improperly secured enclosures resulting in people, including children, being injured. Since 2010, more than half of all ZAA facilities in the country have been cited by the United States Department of Agriculture for serious violations of the AWA and at least 12 ZAA facilities have closed.

The Legislature passed its law restricting the interstate importation of cervidae in 2002 to prevent the

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further spread of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD), a devastating neurological disease found in wild and farmed cervids. Despite this law and efforts by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources to curtail the disease, CWD continues to be found across the state. The Legislature should be taking steps to strengthen its laws regarding cervids, not weaken them. Allowing ZAA accredited facilities to be exempt from this important law puts Minnesota's already threatened deer populations at further risk.

For these reasons, we respectfully urge you to vote no on HF4065. Please do not hesitate to reach out to me with any questions you may have. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Lindsay Vierheilig".

Lindsay Vierheilig
Legislative Affairs Manager
Animal Legal Defense Fund
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