

## Letters to the Editor

### Essentiality of access to federal animal welfare records

In these hyper-partisan times, governmental transparency is more important than ever. In this regard, February's decision by the USDA to remove from its website thousands of records providing information on compliance with the Animal Welfare and Horse Protection acts is a substantial step backwards. These documents included inspection reports of commercial animal breeding facilities, animal research facilities, and roadside zoos as well as information about violations of the Horse Protection Act. In taking these documents down, the USDA has made it more difficult for veterinarians and others working to correct systemic animal welfare problems. As a profession, we must challenge this action.

The USDA appears to have made this decision, at least in part, in response to a lawsuit brought by two individuals who had received several official warnings for horse soring and who claimed that posting reports containing the names of alleged violators online was a violation of the federal Privacy Act. However, many state and local government agencies currently publish the names of individuals or businesses accused of criminal activity or code violations. Given that our tax dollars fund the federal inspections that produce these reports, there is even greater justification for publishing inspection results and violations. For individuals who

purchase puppies from breeding facilities too distant for them to personally assess, animal welfare records are often their only means of avoiding businesses that engage in animal cruelty and neglect. Not being able to easily review enforcement actions or inspection reports will clearly result in an unacceptable reduction in public protections for people and animals.

More than 100 years ago, US Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis wrote that "sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants." When it comes to upholding animal welfare standards, veterinarians are ideally equipped to direct a light toward the darkness and ensure accountability, but we need our government to work with us, not against us, in this regard.

In mid-February, after a torrent of criticism from the general public, animal protection organizations, and even many animal industry groups, the USDA reposted

a small portion of Animal Welfare Act compliance records. Although I welcome this step, it does not go nearly far enough, and I urge the USDA to immediately repost all of this key animal welfare-related information.

Our veterinary oath makes clear that one of our primary professional responsibilities is the "protection of animal health and welfare." Americans expect veterinarians to be on the frontlines of this effort. Fulfilling our societal duty means challenging the USDA on its decision and working to protect the accumulation and accessibility of data veterinarians need to protect animal welfare in a wide range of industries. I hope to see the AVMA and colleagues joining in this effort to ensure that all of these records are once again made easily accessible to the public.

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