NIRC pays 4th fine for poor research practices

The University of Louisiana at Lafayette's New Iberia Research Center agreed in July to pay a $100,000 settlement to the USDA for alleged violations during 2012-2014, marking the fourth time the institution has been fined for its treatment of research monkeys.

Settling complaints of poor enclosure hygiene, insecure enclosures that led to five primates' escapes, injured primates and research activities not assured to produce duplicate experiments, the NIRC faces its largest fine yet. The newest fine dwarfs the $2,062 paid in 2007; $18,000 paid in 2010; and $38,571 paid in 2013 in related settlements.

In the settlement, UL Lafayette did not admit wrongdoing in the allegations from the USDA. Both parties have declined to hold a hearing.

Francois Villinger, Ph.D., the NIRC director, said the settlement will not inhibit the institution's research.

"Most alleged issues raised in the complaints had been self-reported and remedied by the research center, even before the USDA inspections," he said.

Villinger said all employees follow the standard operating procedures as set by the NIRC. If an employee does not follow the procedures, they participate in one-on-one training to ensure they do.

The settlements have drawn criticism from Stop Animal Exploitation NOW!, an Ohio-based watchdog group that monitors the NIRC.

"There are very few laboratories that you can find that have been fined this many times in a relatively short time," said Michael Budkie, SAEN executive director.

The USDA's complaint details each incident, including one in March 2013 when an adult female rhesus macaque and her infant were placed in a squeeze restraint. The adult female resisted, resulting in the breaking of her arm, which was then left unattended for five days by the NIRC's assigned veterinarian.

And in July of 2013, a rhesus macaque had its hand trapped in an insecure enclosure, resulting in multiple lacerations and two fractured fingers. The monkey later died from a cerebral hemorrhage likely caused by the incident.

"Both of those examples," Budkie responded, "show the New Iberia staff don't pay attention to their animals at all times.

"Leaving a monkey alone with a broken bone for five days is simply unconscionable," he continued.

In a news release posted to the NIRC webpage, UL Lafayette stated the alleged violations occurred during "routine housing and care of non-human primates, most of which were self-reported by the New Iberia Research Center."

In a follow-up to a previous Vermilion article, there were reported public concerns over the NIRC's more than 200 chimpanzees. Alleged violations of chimp abuse were apparent in earlier USDA complaints, but not the most current complaint.

"The center retired its chimpanzees in 2015, prior to their reclassification under the Endangered Species Act," Villinger said.

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