

INTERIOR

Wildlife research lab lacks 'scientific integrity' — group

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A federal research center operated by the U.S. Geological Survey does not have the resources, staff or oversight to adequately track animal disease outbreaks and determine the causes of wildlife die-offs, according to a complaint filed yesterday by a government watchdog group.

The administrative **complaint** sent to Interior Secretary Sally Jewell by **Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility**, targets USGS's National Wildlife Health Center in Madison, Wis.

It says the health center has failed to adequately care for research animals and needs to be subjected to routine, independent inspections to restore the "scientific integrity" of its core mission.

USGS strongly denies that the problems outlined in the complaint have any merit.

"There are a fair to significant number of inaccuracies" in the complaint and associated press statements issued by PEER, said A.B. Wade, a USGS spokeswoman in Washington, D.C.

PEER's complaint asks Jewell to take immediate action. It says the center "has suffered from a number of serious deficiencies and deviations from accepted scientific standards," in large part because the center "is not subject to external oversight."

PEER highlights several documents, including an October 2013 letter to the wildlife center's director from the National Institutes of Health's Office of Laboratory Animal Welfare that lists "numerous significant deficiencies" in a semiannual review of the lab. Those include "chronic lack of properly trained staff in critical positions," poor record-keeping and "insufficient resources to provide adequate clinical care such as anesthetic equipment, pathology support, medications, and minimal continuing education."

PEER also points to an August 2013 USGS internal review of the health center that evaluated an anonymous complaint that alleged, among other things, that the health center is "mismanaged." The internal review dismissed those allegations but did conclude that there is "room for improvement of the animal care activities" at the health center.

PEER Staff Counsel Laura Dumais argued that there's little evidence that USGS has taken any steps to make those improvements.

"We filed this complaint because the record indicated that USGS isn't doing enough to correct years of reported deficiencies," Dumais said. "The fact that we had to sue USGS to force release of the lab's inspection reports indicates an institutional mindset inclined to ignore rather than address problems."

PEER says one way to fix this is for the health center to arrange "for inspection and accreditation by an unaffiliated external organization such as the Association for Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care International." Other federal research centers operated by U.S. EPA, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Food and Drug Administration have done so, the complaint says.

"If these agencies acceded to independent accreditation of their laboratory facilities, the lack of such accreditation at USGS — Interior's premier science agency — is a glaring deviation," the complaint says.

The biomedical laboratory, established in 1975, is designed to help wildlife managers track and assess the impacts of diseases such as white-nose syndrome, which has killed at least 7 million bats. Researchers, among other things, work to identify the role of various pathogens in contributing to wildlife losses.

The PEER complaint says the problems at the health center are important because it is "a key contributor to [Interior Department] and other federal agency decision-makers addressing management steps on significant diseases of wildlife, domestic animals, and humans," including chronic wasting disease and West Nile virus.

"Because it cannot be assured that these animals in [health center] research were in optimal health prior to, and during these studies, the scientific validity of findings from studies involving these animals may be suspect," it says.

Wade, the USGS spokeswoman, said PEER's contention that the center is not independently inspected is "just not true."

An independent firm at the request of the health center visited the site in 2013, she said, and the inspection found that the health center was operating correctly.

But it did point to "concerns with staff turnover and lack of resources," she said, noting that the inspection followed the federal budget sequester and government shutdown.

Since that inspection, she said, the health center has hired a full-time attending veterinarian and filled vacant positions.

"Significant measures have been made to overcome deficiencies during the sequestration time period," Wade said.

She also said an early 2015 incident that closed part of the health center, and that appears to be mentioned in the PEER complaint, was caused by a sewage leak in an

animal isolation wing of the lab. That wing remains closed but is "undergoing significant renovations" that should be completed this spring, she said.

"That facility is 40 to 50 years old," she said. "We recognize it's an aging facility, and measures are taken to maintain it as best as possible."

She added: "We certainly do take allegations of this nature seriously. I know that center, and they take pride in what they do. They've done some groundbreaking research."

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