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San Diego County Fair Elephant Ride Provider Unable To Comply With New Safety Policy

Fair Board to Continue Contract with Controversial Vendor Despite Public Safety Risks

San Diego, Calif. (March 10, 2014) – The Performing Animal Welfare Society (PAWS) has just discovered that Have Trunk Will Travel, the controversial elephant ride provider for the San Diego County Fair at Del Mar, is no longer certified by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). The company reportedly opted to forego certification due to its inability to comply with a new AZA policy intended to protect elephant handlers from injury and death. The San Diego County Fair Board has indicated it will allow the elephant rides to continue this year, despite known risks to handlers and the public.

“In light of this disturbing new information that directly affects human safety, the San Diego County Fair Board should take immediate action to end the elephant rides,” said Ed Stewart, president of the California-based Performing Animal Welfare Society and a former Hollywood animal trainer with more than 30 years experience caring for elephants.

Stewart continued, “The elephants giving rides at the San Diego County Fair are wild animals who have been brutally broken and trained through pain and fear. Using them for rides is an accident waiting to happen.”

The AZA safety policy was announced in 2011, after elephants killed one zookeeper and seriously injured another at two different zoos. It prohibits keepers from sharing unrestricted space with elephants. The San Diego Zoo and the San Diego Zoo Safari Park are accredited by the AZA.

Have Trunk Will Travel is now accredited by the Zoological Association of America (ZAA), a fringe group that has weak animal care standards, endorses substandard roadside zoos, and promotes the private ownership of exotic pets, a practice prohibited in California.

“Have Trunk Will Travel has shown its true colors, seeking cover for its unsafe practices from an organization that holds extreme views about captive wildlife and lacks important safety standards,” stated Dr. Alison Stanley, director of the Orange County Affiliate of the League of Humane Voters of California. “Elephant rides are unsafe and inhumane, and they have no place at the San Diego County Fair or any other fair in our state.”

The Fair Board became the center of controversy in 2011 following the release of a videotape showing Have Trunk Will Travel staff, including one of the owners, viciously striking elephants with a spike-tipped club called a bullhook and using electric shock to force an elephant to perform a trick. The board approved the elephant rides contract but vowed to revisit the issue in 2014, when the AZA safety policy goes into effect. At a February meeting, the board stated it would allow the rides to continue this year and then reconsider the contract.

"It is astonishing that the Del Mar Fair Board would countenance the continued abuse of these animals and expose members of the community to risk of injury, while exposing their own organization to the danger of substantial financial liability - for a mere \$12,000 in revenues," said Michelle Ciccarelli Lerach, an attorney and supporter of the ban on elephant rides.

“There is no excuse for continuing the elephant rides,” concluded Britta Wilson, a former San Diego Zoo animal trainer who previously testified against the rides. “The Fair Board can choose to end the elephant rides now and protect the many children and families who attend our Fair. There is no reason to wait.”

The San Diego County Fair is the last in Southern California to offer elephant rides. The Los Angeles County Fair and the Orange County Fair ended elephant rides in 2012. Other fairs and community events, including the California State Fair, have also stopped offering the rides.

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*Founded in 1984, the **Performing Animal Welfare Society (PAWS)** operates three sanctuaries in Northern California that are home to a variety of species including 11 elephants, African lions, tigers, and other exotic animals rescued or retired from circuses, zoos and the exotic pet trade. PAWS is licensed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. It is accredited by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries, and is rated a four-star charity by Charity Navigator. PAWS is celebrating 30 years of rescue, sanctuary care, education and advocacy.*

*The **League of Humane Voters (LOHV)** is a non-partisan organization whose mission is to create, unite and strengthen local political action committees that work to enact animal-friendly legislation and elect candidates for public office who will use their votes and influence for animal protection.*