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Circus Elephant Escape in Missouri Underscores Risk to Public Safety Posed By Elephant Rides at San Diego County Fair

San Diego, Calif. (March 24, 2014) – The Performing Animal Welfare Society (PAWS) and the Orange County Affiliate of the League of Humane Voters of California (LOHV-Calif.) are alarmed by news of an incident on Saturday in which three elephants broke out of a Shrine Circus in St. Charles, Missouri, and ran uncontrolled in a parking lot for 45 minutes. The elephants – who reportedly escaped their handlers in the children’s rides area – allegedly were spooked by loud noises from circus-goers. Reports cite damage to vehicles but no human or elephant injuries.

“The escape of the circus elephants in Missouri is just one more example of why elephants should not be used for rides. You can never be fully in control of a four-ton elephant, and it’s very dangerous to think you can,” 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. “Elephants used for rides are wild animals who have been brutally broken and trained through pain and fear, making elephant rides an accident waiting to happen.”

“Safety should be the number one priority for the San Diego County Fair,” said Dr. Alison Stanley, director of the Orange County Affiliate of the League of Humane Voters of California. “Elephant rides are unsafe and inhumane, and as long as the Fair offers this attraction people will be at risk.”

Other incidents involving elephants occur regularly around the country. A partial list (not including deaths and injuries in zoos) includes:

- 2010 – A circus elephant bolted from handlers in Lynchburg, Va., running past a line of people; it took 30 minutes to recapture her. The elephant has been used for rides.
- 2010 – An elephant killed a handler at a circus in Wilkes-Barre, Penn. The elephant had been giving rides in the days preceding the attack.
- 2009 – A startled elephant giving rides slammed into a loading platform, collapsing it and injuring at least 15 children at a circus in Indianapolis, Ind.

- 2007 – A spooked elephant ran over an employee at a Renaissance Fair in Apache Junction, Ariz., dislocating his jaw and breaking several ribs.
- 2006 – An elephant injured two employees giving rides in Marlborough, Mass. She pinned them against the loading ramp, causing a chest injury to one man and breaking the other man’s arm.

PAWS and LOHV-Calif. recently exposed the fact 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 cannot comply with a new AZA safety policy designed to protect handlers from being crushed to death or injured by elephants. The San Diego Zoo and the San Diego Zoo Safari Park are accredited by the AZA.

“The AZA recognizes that it is extremely dangerous to be in direct contact with elephants and has taken precautions to protect zookeepers’ lives,” said Stewart. “At the same time, Have Trunk Will Travel has no problem with putting children on the backs of wild-caught elephants for rides – and for profit.”

Both organizations are calling on the 22nd District Agricultural Association, the agency that runs the state-owned Fairgrounds and approves contracts for the San Diego County Fair, to immediately end the elephant rides, given this new information. The board meets again on April 8 and is expected to vote on the elephant rides contract.

“There is absolutely no reason to allow elephant rides at the San Diego County Fair this year,” stated Stanley. “Public safety demands the rides end now.”

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.