

Sira Camilo
Director
Fair Expo Center
10901 Coral Way
Miami, FL 33165

Via email



May 12, 2021

Reference: Hosting of Repticon at Fair Expo Center on May 15 & 16

Dear Ms. Camilo,

World Animal Protection is concerned that reptiles will be bought, sold, and exhibited at Fair Expo Center this coming weekend, despite a growing invasive reptile problem in the state of Florida and a national pandemic, which can most likely be traced back to human interactions with wild animals.

Florida's invasive reptile problem

As reported in the Miami Herald last month, Florida has banned the sale of tegu lizards and green iguanas due to the overpopulation of these animals in the wild and the destruction caused to native wildlife. Florida spends more than \$10 million annually on invasive species management. Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission notes that exotic species pose a significant threat to Florida's ecology, economy and human health and safety.

Animals are often dumped outside once the novelty of possessing them wears off, presenting a threat to native wildlife. Most invasive fish and wildlife in Florida were established through the escape or intentional release of captive exotic animals. Invasive species are the second leading cause of animal population decline and extinction worldwide. They have contributed directly to the decline of 42% of threatened and endangered species in the United States and cost an estimated \$120 billion each year to detect, collect, and remove.

It seems counter to the challenges facing Florida, therefore, to allow the hosting of an event aimed at ownership of reptiles as pets.

The role of the commercial wildlife trade in public health

The role of the commercial wildlife trade in public health epidemics should not be underestimated. The wildlife trade is a key transmission mechanism for infectious diseases and deadly zoonoses—diseases such as Covid-19, which are transmitted from animals to humans. Zoonoses are responsible for over 2 billion cases of human illness and over 2 million human deaths each year.¹

The commercial trading of reptiles for the pet market has been specifically identified as an important factor in the emergence of zoonoses. Wild species, such as snakes and turtles, carry bacteria, such as Salmonella, that frequently cause infections in people, and can even lead to death, especially in small children and the elderly. Reptiles shed the Salmonella bacteria from their intestinal tract and carry it on their skin or shells. Harmless to reptiles, Salmonella bacteria infections in humans can cause stomach cramps, fever, and diarrhea, or

¹ Grace, D., Mutua, F., Ochungo, P., et al. Mapping of poverty and likely zoonoses hotspots. Zoonoses Project 4. Report to the UK Department for International Development. 2012

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infections in the blood, urine, bones, and joints. Many people are treated without hospitalization, while others require it.

In 2020, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced two salmonellosis outbreaks linked to pet reptiles—a total of 22 people across 18 states were hospitalized after coming into contact with bearded dragons and pet turtles.² Just last month, the CDC reported another salmonellosis outbreak linked to pet turtles, that caused 22 people to fall ill across seven states, with eight people being hospitalized after coming into contact with pet turtles.³ Similarly, in December 2019, the Public Health Agency of Canada announced a salmonellosis outbreak that affected 92 people between April 2017 and October 2019.⁴ Snakes and frozen rodents used to feed snakes were the sources of those infections.

Reptile-associated salmonellosis outbreaks disproportionately affect children. The results of a CDC analysis of an outbreak linked to small turtles in 2015 and 2016 showed that more than 202 people were sickened nationwide. Forty-one percent of the patients were children younger than five years.⁵ Some people in these outbreaks became sick even when they did not touch the turtles, but had turtles in their households. In 2011, the CDC investigated an outbreak linked to African dwarf frogs; 241 people were sick, and sixty-nine percent were younger than ten years of age.⁶

The CDC's position on the dangers posed by reptiles to child health is unequivocal:

- "Children younger than 5 years of age, people with weak immune systems, and adults older than 65 years of age should not handle or touch amphibians or reptiles or their environment because they are at a higher risk for serious illness and hospitalization from Salmonella."⁷
- "Reptiles, amphibians, poultry, rodents, and ferrets are not suitable for settings with children under 5 years of age."⁸
- "Children aged less than 5 years and immunocompromised persons should avoid direct and indirect contact with reptiles."⁹

This is particularly concerning as children four years of age and under are able to enter Repticon events for free.

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, US Outbreaks of Zoonotic Diseases Spread between Animals & People available at www.cdc.gov/healthypets/outbreaks.html

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Salmonella Outbreak Linked to Small Turtles—Investigation notice (February 23, 2021), available at <https://www.cdc.gov/salmonella/typhimurium-02-21/index.html>

⁴ Public Health Agency of Canada, Public Health Notice: Outbreak of Salmonella infections linked to snakes and rodents (December 10, 2020), available at <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/public-health-notices/2019/outbreak-salmonella-infections-snakes-rodents.html>

⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Four Multistate Outbreaks of Human Salmonella Infections Linked to Small Turtles (May 18, 2016), available at <https://www.cdc.gov/salmonella/small-turtles-10-15/index.html>

⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Multistate Outbreak of Human Salmonella Typhimurium Infections Associated with Contact with Water Frogs (July 20, 2011), available at <https://www.cdc.gov/salmonella/2011/water-frog-7-20-2011.html>

⁷ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Safe Handling of Pet Reptiles & Amphibians (accessed 2020), available at <https://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/pets/reptiles/safe-handling.html>

⁸ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Animals in Schools and Daycares (accessed 2020), available at <https://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/specific-groups/schools.html>

⁹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Reptile-Associated Salmonellosis – Selected States, 1996-1998, available at <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm4844a1.htm>



All public settings where animals are located are strongly encouraged to follow the National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians (NASPHV) Compendium of Measures to Prevent Disease Associated with Animals in Public Settings, 2017, which states that “[c]hildren < 5 years of age should not have direct contact with animals that are considered likely to carry zoonotic pathogens (eg, preweaned calves, reptiles, amphibians, or live poultry)” and also that food and drinks, and items such as strollers, pacifiers, cups, and toys should also not be allowed in areas with animals.¹⁰

Despite claims that the pet trade industry is well-regulated, most regulatory oversight of wildlife trade is currently aimed at conservation, rather than prevention of disease introduction. In 2019, World Animal Protection investigators visited multiple exotic pet events to observe the conditions of the animals and document visitor safety and animal welfare—please take a moment to watch our short documentary ([here](#)). The investigation raised a number of serious concerns at each reptile expo we visited. They included:

- **A lack of concern for the spread of reptile-associated bacteria:** although some vendors had antibacterial soap on their tables, use of it was not encouraged or only encouraged before handling an animal.
- **A lack of safety signage:** few warnings about the importance of washing hands and keeping young children and immunocompromised away from reptiles.
- **Inadequate space during transportation:** animals are typically transported in small, clear plastic containers stacked one on top of the other.
- **Inadequate space during events:** animals typically remained in the same plastic containers used for transportation for the duration of the event. Snakes were regularly observed bending themselves to fit within the four sides of the container in an effort to stretch as long as possible, while other animals were observed desperately trying to find a way out.
- **Overcrowding of animals:** even when placed in larger tanks or aquariums, geckos, lizards, and other reptiles were observed grossly overcrowded, with as many as 12 animals piled on each other, increasing the risk of injury and illness.
- **Unhealthy animals:** animals available for sale were observed to be malnourished, injured or sick.

Aside from the threats to human health posed by reptiles, large numbers of these wild animals will die within their first year of captivity due to the rigors of transport, the stress of confinement and handling, and poor animal husbandry. While animal mortality rates are subject to debate, estimates vary from 4% to 75% for the first year in someone’s home, equating to many thousands of animals.¹¹

With the above considerations in mind, we hope you will pledge to discontinue hosting reptile expo events at Fair Expo Center in the future.

Thank you for your consideration. I am available to discuss these matters at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ben Williamson".

Ben Williamson , US programs director

¹⁰ Public Veterinary Medicine: Public Health, Compendium of Measures to Prevent Disease Associated with Animals in Public Settings, 2017, available at <http://nasphv.org/Documents/AnimalContactCompendium2017.pdf>

¹¹ World Animal Protection, *Suffering in Silence: Uncovering the cruelty of the global trade in Ball pythons* (2020), available at <https://www.worldanimalprotection.us/reports>