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ARTICLES

- Time to contact your MEP
- Commission calls for new primate report
- Discussion of the text within the Commission
- Swiss researchers appeal primate study



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⌚ TIME TO CONTACT YOUR MEP

The revision of the directive has now reached the point where researchers need to start making contact with their MEPs

The proposed text of the revised directive could be published and sent to the European Parliament within a few months, so the scientific community needs to start contacting MEPs to explain why animal research is so important and why the new directive must not restrict or delay scientific research unreasonably.

With the European Parliament, timing is crucial. If you contact MEPs too early, before there is any proposed legislative text to talk about, they won't want to know. There are so many items of legislation under discussion at any time that they only have time for those that are currently on hand. If you try to talk to them too late, the antivivisection lobbyists will have already persuaded the MEPs to support them.

However, the recent Written Declaration on primate research and several meetings about this within the Parliament have now made MEPs aware that the revised directive is soon to be sent to them.

In our judgement, we have now reached the time when European researchers must start contacting their MEPs if they want to prevent unrealistic restrictions being included in the new directive on animal research.

Remember, antivivisection groups may have emotive arguments and shocking (but inaccurate) photos, but we have one unique thing to offer MEPs – we can show them what animal research is really like. There is no other way they can really find out how laboratory animals are treated. Visits to laboratories also give them the opportunity to talk to scientists who know first-hand why it is so important for medical progress that we do study animals.

Which MEPs should you contact?

Most EU countries are divided into regions with one or more MEPs representing each region. You should obviously contact the MEPs for your region. If your country does not use regions to elect MEPs, you can invite any of your national MEPs.

You can find the MEPs for your country and region at this site: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/members/public/geoSearch.do?language=EN>. It allows you to click through to a profile of the MEPs with their

addresses.

The best way to invite an MEP

Write to them, using the headed letterpaper of your institution, at their Brussels address and invite them to make a personal visit to your laboratory. Do not try to arrange for more than one MEP to visit at a time – they are far too busy to find a time when two or more schedules are free. Do not be surprised if the first free date they can find is two months ahead – that is not unusual.

A typical letter of invitation would look something like this:

Dear xxxxxx MEP,

I am sure you are aware that the EU directive which regulates animal research (EC86/609) is currently being revised and the proposed new text is expected to be adopted by the Commission and sent to the Parliament for its first reading in a matter of weeks.

Like many medical research scientists, I am concerned that the political pressure created by lobbying groups opposed to animal research may result in a number of completely unrealistic measures being included in this directive. It is very important that our elected representatives in the European Parliament have the opportunity to find out about this scientifically crucial, but sometimes quite emotive, issue for themselves.

Accordingly, I would like to invite you to visit our research institute to see for yourself how we safeguard the welfare of laboratory animals and avoid using them whenever possible. You will be able to meet my scientific colleagues and we can explain how the research we conduct is aimed at improving our understanding of health and illness, so that we can ultimately develop better ways to treat diseases.

If your office would like to telephone me on I would be pleased to find a mutually convenient date when we can invite you to visit.

How the ECBR can help

The coalition has access to information about many MEPs and can advise you about how to make your visit a success. Please contact us (matfield@ecbr.eu) if you intend to invite your MEP, so that we can help make the visit a success.

European Commission seeks a 'scientific opinion' on primate research

The European Commission is seeking to strengthen its position on the need for primate research

Recently, the Directorate-General for the Environment requested a 'scientific opinion' – eg a report about a) the importance of using primates in research, b) the possibility of replacing the use of primates in research and testing and c) the effect of limiting or banning the use of primates in the EU. Within the European Commission, DG Environment is responsible for the revision of the animal experimentation directive.

This report has clearly been commissioned in response to the 2007 European Parliament Written Declaration calling for a timetable for the

replacement of primate experiments. DG Environment released a firm rejection to the declaration, but knows that this will be a central issue in the revision of the directive, so they are seeking to back it up with a clear, scientifically-based statement about the continuing need for primate research.

They have asked the Commission's Scientific Committee on Health and Environmental Risks to produce the opinion. This committee is composed of experts in toxicology and environmental health. They will be familiar with the use of primates in certain areas of toxicology but not in the majority of research fields in which they are used.

Fortunately, their procedure requires a consultation phase (which closed on June 6th) during which they called for peer-reviewed publications and authoritative scientific statements on the subject. Many European scientific organisations and scientists responded with information. In addition, the committee's procedures require them to perform literature searches.

DG Environment has asked for the report by the end of October 2008, but experience suggests that it may well not be delivered until two or three months later.

🕒 Inter-service consultation produces lengthy negotiations inside Commission

The final phase of drafting the proposed new directive has, yet again, produced delays.

During the inter-services consultation – the phase when DG Environment formally consults other Directorates-General within the Commission – other Directorates-General raised objections to some of the proposed provisions for the new directive. These objections were serious enough to require resolution, so there have been a series of meetings between the various DGs, but they do not appear to have reached a compromise yet. If they do not reach a compromise, DG Environment could employ an alternate, but little-used, method to have the proposed new directive adopted by the College of Commissioners, but this would take at least two months. After adoption the proposal is published and sent to the Parliament and Council for its first reading.

Given the summer break, it is unlikely that it could be adopted before September or October. This leaves a limited window of opportunity if the Parliament is to have time to complete a first reading before April next year, when all parliamentary activity effectively ceases in preparation for the June 2009 European Elections. Delaying the publication of the proposed directive until after the elections is likely to result in criticism from several quarters, so the pressure is on the Commission to resolve their internal differences over the summer.

🕒 Swiss researchers appeal against refusal of primate research project

After leading Swiss research institutes appeal against a court decision to block two primate studies

In 2006, when researchers at the University of Zurich and Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich originally applied for approval to study cortical changes in primates during learning processes, they were refused permission because an external ethical committee decided that a 12 hour water deprivation – used to increase the value of the fluid reward used during training – offended the dignity of the animals. The

requirement to consider the animals' dignity was added to the Swiss constitution in 2004.

Recently, the two institutions appealed against this decision to their local administrative court. In a surprise ruling, the court upheld the refusal, arguing that society was unlikely to see any benefit from the research project during its 3-year duration. However, this appears to be a misinterpretation of Swiss law which requires that, for each research project using animals, the effects on the animals must be weighed against the benefits to society. The court interpreted this to mean 'immediate benefit' – something that would effectively ban all basic research on animals.

The two institutions have agreed to appeal the lower court's ruling at the Swiss supreme court.