

Tuberculosis in Elephants With Ringling Bros.

Delcianna J. Winders
Deputy General Counsel, PETA Foundation

Dr. Heather Rally
Wildlife Veterinarian, PETA Foundation

March 6, 2015

Just three days ago, as Ringling was aware, PETA received documents through an open records request that Ringling had long fought to keep us from having. These documents show that since at least 2010, Ringling has had elephants with active tuberculosis (TB) potentially putting not only the elephants, but circus employees, arena workers, and the public at risk of contracting this deadly transmissible disease. Ringling knew that PETA was preparing to release this new information when Ringling's parent company, Feld Entertainment, announced that elephants would be taken out of their shows by 2018.

We believe that this, at least in part, was a pre-emptive move by Ringling to try to keep the public in the dark about the extent of the health risk posed by transporting sick elephants to cities throughout the country. These elephants carry the human strain of TB, and it is highly transmissible from elephants to humans, even without direct contact, as recognized in a [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) report](#). According to Kenneth Vail, a former U.S. Department of Agriculture attorney who went through the revolving door in 2011 to become Ringling's Animal Welfare Act compliance officer, TB is "[probably going to be the downfall of Feld's elephants](#)."

It is clear from the new information that PETA just received, as well as from the damaging records that we had already gathered, that Ringling must not wait until 2018 to take the elephants out of its tawdry shows but instead retire them from performing on the road or anywhere else immediately.

Background

Tuberculosis in elephants is a nationwide issue that is not being adequately addressed and could reach epidemic proportions. TB carried by an elephant was recently [linked](#) to an outbreak among eight humans in Tennessee, some of whom had no direct contact with the elephant.

TB is primarily a disease of captive elephants. Between 1994 and 2010, TB was [confirmed](#) by culture in 50 U.S. elephants—approximately 12 percent of the country's current elephant population. Most of these cases involved Asian elephants—the species most commonly used in circuses; experts estimate that 18 percent of Asian elephants in the U.S. test positive for TB. The actual percentage may be much larger, as it is common for TB in elephants to be identified on necropsy even when it was not detected through testing while they were alive.

Recent Incidences of TB in Elephants With Ringling Bros.

While Ringling has fought to keep information about tuberculosis secret, available documents suggest an exceedingly high rate of TB in elephants used by Ringling. Elephants used in circuses are put at increased risk—often immune-compromised, they are confined to poorly ventilated boxcars or trailers for long hours and even days on end, subjected to stressful and abusive training practices, and unable to perform natural, species-specific behaviors because of the constraint of chains.

Feld Entertainment has vigorously opposed proposed standards that would require more accurate testing of elephants and more precautions. Ringling has delayed and tried to prevent the release of documents that would reveal how many Ringling elephants have tested positive for TB, but Ringling veterinary records show that at least 19 elephants have been diagnosed with the disease and at least three more were discovered to have the disease upon necropsy. This is roughly one third of the elephants in Ringling's possession.

Documents just received by PETA reveal that a sample collected from the elephant Banko on April 17, 2014, while she was performing with Ringling in Fairfax, Virginia, and cultured was tested for tuberculosis. More than two months later, on [June 25, 2014](#), following performances in front of audiences across the United States, the test results came back—[Banko had active TB](#) and had been exposing the other elephants, the circus staff, the arena workers, and countless members of the public to the disease. Despite the transmission risk, none of the elephants performing alongside Banko were removed for quarantine. Banko herself had similarly been exposed to TB the previous year, when the elephant [Asia tested positive for TB](#) while on the road.

Banko and Asia are only the latest elephants used by Ringling to test positive for TB. Records reveal that the circus' so-called Center for Elephant Conservation has been under quarantine imposed by the state of Florida for years. As of June 2014, at least [nine elephants at the CEC were under quarantine orders](#). Documents that PETA obtained just this week, which Ringling fought for years to keep out of our hands, reveal that in 2011, [29 elephants with Ringling](#) tested reactive to tuberculosis. Since then, at least eight of those elephants have died, including Jewell, who was transferred to the Little Rock Zoo [in violation of Florida's animal quarantine laws](#).

In 2012, the elephant Susan, who had performed for many years with Ringling's Blue Unit, tested positive for TB. She was euthanized later that year. The state of Tennessee prohibited the entry of elephant Karen in 2011 based on her testing positive on two serum tests. Other states allowed Karen to perform, Tennessee has since let her in, and she remains on the road today. During an [August 2011](#) inspection in San Jose, California, the Oakland Zoo's veterinarian inspected the elephants with Ringling and their health records and reported that the elephant Sarah had tested positive on serum tests for TB. Sarah also had an elevated white blood cell count, suffered from chronic anemia, and had a purulent discharge from her vagina—all possible symptoms of tuberculosis. Based on these symptoms and her positive TB tests, [Dr. Denise Sofranko](#), the head of the USDA's elephant inspection team, stated to other USDA officials that Ringling "need[ed]" to perform a culture of Sarah's vaginal discharge for TB. It is unclear from the public records whether Ringling ever performed such a test, but Sarah was forced to continue performing, though it appears that she has since been removed from the road. In July 2011,

inspectors with the Los Angeles Department of Animal Control learned that three elephants on tour with Ringling's Red Unit had positive serum TB tests and were being treated with isoniazid, an anti-TB medication.

Not a New Issue: Tuberculosis Identified in Ringling Elephants as Early as 1978

Records show a long history of TB in elephants with Ringling Bros. In [2000](#), a USDA investigator was assigned to get to the bottom of allegations that Ringling was hiding the full extent of TB infection, but company attorneys refused to turn over the medical records. [An informant told the USDA](#) "that he personally knew that the circus hired a private physician to test employees" for TB "without reporting any positive results to the health authorities" and that "some employees did" in fact "test positive." The informant also stated that he had been told that "about half of the elephants in each of the [Ringling] shows had tuberculosis."

Sam Haddock, the former Ringling employee who came forward and provided PETA with photographs of Ringling's baby-elephant trainings shortly before his death, stated in a [declaration](#), "All the elephants at the CEC [Center for Elephant Conservation—Ringling's breeding, training, and 'retirement' compound] have been treated for TB, some because they were TB-positive, others because they were exposed." (Haddock worked for Ringling on and off from 1976 to 2005.) In his August 2009 declaration, Haddock discussed the elephant Vance in particular:

Vance . . . is in bad shape from TB. He has lots of trunk discharge and is spitting sputum all over the place. He had TB while I worked there, and I saw him again 6 to 8 months ago. He's lost a lot of weight. . . . He's rouge, treatment is a big ordeal so they've stopped.

Vance is still at the CEC today and still under quarantine, according to the most recent available records.

The state of Florida also quarantined five of the elephants at a second Ringling retirement facility in [2007](#).

In [2006](#), two elephants at the CEC tested positive for TB, three elephants were pulled out of the traveling units because they had been exposed to at least one of the infected elephants, and most of the elephants at the CEC were quarantined. As of [April 2007](#), the facility, which housed 30 elephants, remained under a TB watch.

[In 1999](#), two elephants with Ringling tested positive for TB. Ringling's veterinarian expressed concern that as the circus "continue[d] intensified testing", additional elephants would test positive for TB. An additional five elephants at the facility were being treated for TB "either because of past clinical suspicions, positive DNA tests, or positive ELISA tests (blood results)." Five others were also treated because they were "in contact" with TB or had "had positive DNA probe results." According to records maintained by the circus, the elephant [Juliette](#) was put on the road with the circus in 1999 while "being treated for Presumptive TB."

[In 1998](#), the state of Florida placed all elephants at the circus's "retirement center" in Williston, Florida, under quarantine.

Haddock also [reported](#) that he was diagnosed with active TB about a month or two after working on Ringling's Blue Unit in 1978 and was hospitalized, quarantined, and treated. He further [stated](#) that the health department then had the entire Blue Unit tested and that two others tested positive for active TB and a third person tested positive for exposure. All three were treated, according to Haddock.

Conclusion

Feld Entertainment/Ringling must not be allowed to put the public, arena workers and the elephants at risk for three more years. The circus should retire the elephants right now, today, and provide adequate care for them at an appropriate sanctuary. Anything less would be irresponsible and reckless.