

URGENT OPEN LETTER

Dear Honourable Health Minister Kevin Falcon and Deputy Minister John Dyble,

Re: Petting Zoos - A Silent Epidemic

In 2008, Lifeforce asked the BC Ministry of Health to implement regulations regarding petting zoo businesses. The recent outbreak of E. Coli that infected at least 13 people who attended the PNE petting zoo is further cause to regulate the petting zoos.

Petting Zoos are a Silent Epidemic. Not all cases reported because people aren't advised of symptoms and therefore do not link it to the animals. People are usually not properly informed about the health risks and preventative measures. Then the children's complaints of upset tummies, vomiting or diarrhoea are not always reported.

Presently "British officials are considering cracking down on petting zoos after 10 children were hospitalized with E. coli contracted from touching animals, reports the *Telegraph*. Parents were urged yesterday to "think very hard" about taking young children to petting zoos. Four petting zoos have been shut following the E. coli outbreak that affected 57 people. Officials are considering requiring stiffer hygiene conditions and barring children under the age of 5 from petting zoos."

The Vancouver based ecology organization, Lifeforce, has found that many petting zoo operators try to downplay the threats to humans. The animals can harbour a variety of diseases. The pens where children play can be soaked with urine and remains of feces that are not picked up by brooms/shovels.

Petting zoos are hotbeds of serious pathogens, including E. coli and salmonella bacteria. Numerous children have been severely sickened as a result of visiting animal displays, and some have even died. Those who come in contact with E. coli can develop bloody diarrhoea, anaemia, chronic kidney failure, or neurological impairments such as seizures or strokes. There has to be proper hand washing stations – not just hand gels. And there must be a change of clothing and shoes after entering urine soaked/feces covered pens with animals rubbing against clothing. Farmers change all their work clothes and shower. Now biohazards rules at poultry and swine factories mandate change of clothing and showering when entering and leaving these intensive confinement units.

During Lifeforce's investigations we found that there are only guidelines not regulations. These guidelines are often not adhered to and there is a lack of enforcement.

We also looked at other operations that could expose people to illnesses that do not commonly follow petting zoo guidelines. This included a zoo, an aquarium, an auction, children's rodeo and agricultural fairs. Other businesses of concern are animal swap meets, pet stores, circuses, carnivals, farm tours, livestock-birthing exhibits, educational exhibits at schools, and wildlife photo opportunities.

Due to documented health hazards there has been bans and restrictions on petting zoo businesses. In Sweden it is recommended that children under 5 do not visit farms because they are more susceptible to infections. In 2004 72 kids became sick after visiting a BC petting zoo in the Lower Mainland during Halloween events..

Based on our reports Health Authorities agreed with Lifeforce that it should be regulated. So the Government must act now to protect people and animals. Lifeforce urges the government to ban Petting Zoos because health risks and animal welfare abuses cannot be prevented. If governments fail to ban Petting Zoos then all such activities must be regulated and enforced. There must be no entry and no petting by anyone to prevent contamination and cross contamination. These measures will also stop the harassment of these animals that are continuously chased after and grabbed.

This is the very least that must be done in order to try to reduce the health hazards and animal abuses (at the end of the season most up those frightened, cute little animals end up at auction to be slaughtered).

Full Details: <http://www.lifeforcefoundation.org/newsitem.php?id=60>

Please advise me if we can meet to take immediate action in view of upcoming "petting zoo" Halloween events.

Thank you,

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