

Chimps' future prompts debate over NM primate lab (4:37 a.m.)

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M.-A decision to move 186 chimpanzees from a southern New Mexico facility to Texas is pitting government officials and scientists against a coalition of elected officials and animal rights advocates, including New Mexico's governor and also famed primate researcher Dr. Jane Goodall.

The chimps have spent the past decade undisturbed by medical researchers. But the National Institutes of Health has decided to cut government costs by moving the animals to a San Antonio primate facility, where animal rights activists worry they'll be improperly poked, prodded and stabbed in the name of science.

Gov. Bill Richardson and others would prefer to see the chimps' current home-a former biomedical research lab at Holloman Air Force Base-converted into a chimpanzee sanctuary. After visiting the site Tuesday, the governor said the animals are in excellent health, and he suggested the New Mexico lab could instead become a behavioral research facility.

But the director of the Texas facility maintains opponents have it wrong. The chimps will have outstanding care and live in quality surroundings as they undergo testing that can include injections and, in some cases, the use of a needle to remove a small liver sample, he said.

"These are mostly clinical procedures that are also done with human beings," said Dr. John L. VandeBerg, director of the Southwest National Primate Research Center. "We are doing them with chimpanzees to develop drugs and vaccines that can be used in human subjects."

VandeBerg said the research is "ethical and imperative" if scientists are to develop vaccines to prevent the suffering and deaths of millions of people worldwide from Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C and HIV. Chimps share up to 96 percent of their DNA with humans, making them the only animals that can be tested.

VandeBerg said researchers also use chimps to study osteoporosis, cardiovascular disease, osteoarthritis and other aspects of aging.

The colony of chimps traces its roots to the space race and Project Mercury. Their home near Alamogordo, N.M., was once a biomedical research lab operated by The Coulston Foundation. But the foundation turned over the colony to the NIH in 2000 as part of a settlement of animal welfare violations.

The NIH then hired a private company, Massachusetts-based Charles River Laboratories, to manage the facility. The agency decided to send the chimps to Texas after its current 10-year contract with Charles River runs out at the end of 2011.

Richardson visited NIH headquarters in Maryland in August, asking officials to reconsider the decision. Goodall wrote in July seeking to have the chimps retired.

But the NIH maintains the move will save taxpayers \$2 million a year-money that VandeBerg argued could be invested in additional research to combat illnesses-and federal officials are showing no signs of plans to alter course.

"The NIH plan is to transport all of the Alamogordo Primate Facility chimpanzees to the Southwest National Primate Research Center by the end of 2011," NIH spokeswoman Cindy McConnell said Tuesday.

Added Laura Bonar of Animal Protection New Mexico: "It's a legitimate concern for taxpayers to say, 'Is this what we're paying for?' We have an opportunity here with the contract ending, to find a much better way to take care of the chimpanzees."

Richardson said 35 jobs will be lost if the Alamogordo lab closes.

VandeBerg argued the move will consolidate the New Mexico chimps with 172 already living in San Antonio, reducing overhead costs. He said the San Antonio facility has 3,000 other non-human primates, a staff of veterinarians and other experts, a full-service animal hospital and a pathology laboratory.

VandeBerg added it's imperative to keep the animals healthy to make sure they are good candidates for research. He said the chimps can generate revenue: Researchers are charged up to \$70,000 to use a chimp for a single experiment.

"That gives us a huge financial advantage," he said. "It is an advantage over sanctuaries, which cannot generate any revenue from research."