Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

February 14, 2017

The Honorable Donald J. Trump
President of the United States
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

We are writing today in response to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service's (APHIS) decision to remove from its website key documents regarding enforcement and oversight of the Animal Welfare Act (AWA) and Horse Protection Act (HPA), including inspection reports for all regulated entities and annual reports submitted by research laboratories.

We join a broad coalition of organizations – from animal welfare groups to pet store chains, biomedical research groups, and accredited zoos and aquariums – in urging the agency to restore comprehensive online, searchable access to these documents immediately in order to maintain ongoing transparency.

Congress passed the Animal Welfare Act and the Horse Protection Act decades ago, and in recent years Congress has provided tens of millions of dollars for enforcement of these laws. USDA annually inspects approximately 9,000 licensed facilities including commercial dog and cat breeding facilities, laboratories, zoos, circuses, airlines, Tennessee walking horse shows, and other operations. The work product of USDA employees executing these enforcement programs – invaluable information about both compliant and non-compliant licensees – is valued by lawmakers; the media; a variety of industries that use animals in commerce, exhibition, and research; the animal welfare community; and the general public. These are two of our nation's most important and broadly supported animal welfare programs.

The public has a right to know if regulated entities have subjected animals in their care to abuse or otherwise failed to meet basic welfare standards. Public access to information can guide consumer decision-making and plays an important role in deterring regulated entities from violating the law. Public release of inspection reports and laboratory annual reports increases pressure on entities to abide by the rules.

Access to these records has enabled the public to learn about many animal-care violations including by puppy mills, roadside zoos, and training barns engaged in cruel horse soring. It has also provided accountability for research facilities that violate the law, and allowed assessment of how many animals are used (often with taxpayer funding) for research that causes unrelieved pain.

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Lack of access to AWA and HPA documents not only undermines these federal laws, but also interferes with state and local laws meant to protect animals and consumers. For example, seven states currently prohibit the sale of dogs from breeding operations with a history of serious AWA violations. Without ready access to inspection reports, dog sellers in those states will have no practical way to comply with these laws, and state and local law enforcement efforts will be severely impeded.

While the agency has indicated that the public can access these documents by submitting a request under the Freedom of Information Act, history has shown that such requests can take months, and even years, to fulfill. We should be increasing government transparency, not diminishing it and shielding those cited for violations of these key animal welfare laws. We hope you will immediately restore what was removed from USDA's website regarding the Animal Welfare Act and Horse Protection Act, and resume posting inspection reports, annual reports, and other animal welfare related documents so that the public can access them in an efficient and timely way.

Sincerely,

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Member of Congress

Lucille Roybal-Allard
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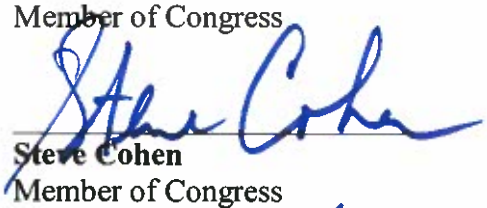

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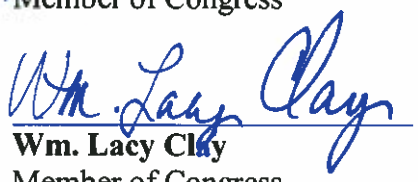

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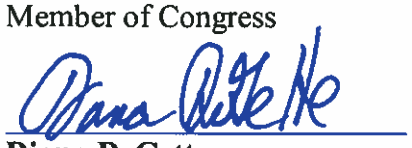

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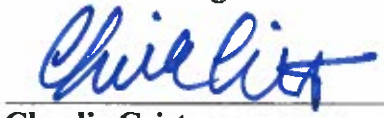

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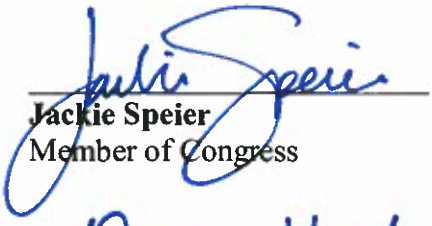

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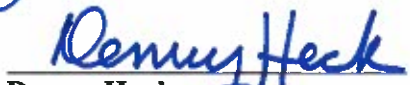

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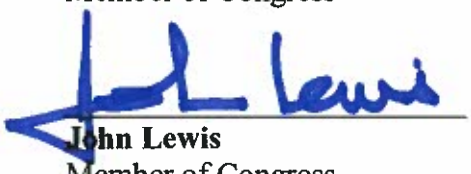

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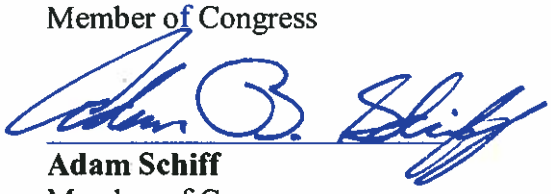

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