

## **National Elephant Center Plan Bad Is for Elephants**

Statement by In Defense of Animals (IDA)

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The proposed elephant center has been designed to meet the needs of the zoo industry for the breeding and warehousing of elephants. As currently conceived, the plan ignores the wealth of scientific information documenting elephants' physical and psychological needs, as well as the negative effects of current zoo conditions on this species.

Welfare failures include:

- The NEC is not being designed as a sanctuary that will afford elephants large expanses of natural habitat where they can live in stable social groupings of closely bonded individuals.
- The NEC will utilize free-contact management methods. These methods rely on archaic, circus-style training and handling that employ chaining and use of the bullhook for physical punishment and negative reinforcement.
- The NEC's revolving door approach, where elephants will be shipped in and out for breeding and short-term holding purposes, is inconsistent with elephants' complex sociality and need for stable social situations. The approach necessarily involves the separation of bonded individuals, which has been documented to be particularly devastating to the health and well-being of these highly social creatures.
- The NEC will continue zoo breeding practices that do not reflect elephants' natural behavior and biology. These practices include social disruption, inappropriate social groups, and lack of maternal experience and support, which can cause high incidence of stillbirths and high infant mortality rate, as well as early separation of offspring, which impedes normal behavioral and social development. Use of surgical artificial insemination procedure also presents a serious welfare concern.

## **Center Does Not Contribute to Elephant Conservation**

- The NEC's purpose is not to conserve elephants in their native habitats, but rather to perpetuate their existence in North American Zoos. *Numerous experts, including the World Conservation Union (IUCN), have concluded that zoo breeding and exhibition programs do not play a necessary role in species conservation. In fact, studies have shown that the cost of maintaining elephants in zoos is 50 times more expensive than protecting equivalent numbers in the wild.*

- The NEC proposal will exacerbate the misdirection of resources away from true conservation programs. U.S. zoos already plan to spend in excess of \$250 million to build new elephant enclosures in the near future. If applied to habitat conservation and anti-poaching programs, this money could save entire populations of elephants in range countries. The NEC plan only adds millions for construction and operation of the Florida facility to the misdirection of scarce conservation dollars.

### **Center Lacks Public Accountability**

- As a private institution, the proposed NEC would not be subject to public records laws as publicly owned zoos currently are. Should publicly-“owned” elephants be sent to the private NEC, the public will be denied access to information about the elephants’ treatment, health and well-being. Additionally, taxpayers will be denied access to information about how their tax dollars are being spent and managed at the private NEC.
- The extent of involvement in the NEC by the circus industry will remain unknown since records will not be accessible to the public.
- Independent oversight of elephant welfare at the proposed NEC will be foreclosed by the public’s inability to obtain the facility’s animal care, maintenance and health records.

### **Center Increases Risk of Disease Transmission**

- The movement of elephants in and out of the NEC, which acts as a central “hub,” increases the possibility of disease transmission to the North American zoo elephant population. Some diseases may be harbored for years until the right circumstances cause it to manifest
- The spread of tuberculosis is of special concern because it can be transmitted between elephants, other animals, and humans. As it is highly likely that the NEC will receive or exchange elephants with circuses for breeding, the risk of infection is even greater since the circus industry continues to struggle with tuberculosis in elephants.
- The NEC will serve as a central receiving point and quarantine for elephants who may be imported into the United States from Asia and Africa, increasing the risk of spreading disease to the general elephant population.