

**To: Jennifer Keaton, Vice President, Congressional Affairs,
Association of Zoos and Aquariums**
From: AZA Nutrition Advisory Group Steering Committee on behalf of the Membership
(Mike Maslanka, Barbara Henry, Jennifer Watts, Heidi Bissell, Matt Brooks, Laura
Franske, Kerri Slifka, Barbara Toddes, Jennifer Watts, and Ann Ward)
Date: 13 August 2015
Re: Use of horsemeat by AZA Accredited Zoos

Historically, horsemeat-based diets have been used for zoo carnivores in the United States due to leanness and economics compared to other red meats. In 2007, upon the removal of USDA inspectors from facilities that process horsemeat for human consumption, the remaining plants closed. Numerous AZA-accredited zoos either had to change their carnivore feeding programs or seek a supplier outside of the US for their horsemeat needs (predominantly, Canada). In an informal survey conducted by the AZA Nutrition Advisory Group (NAG) in June 2015, it is evident that AZA-accredited zoos still use horsemeat as part (or all) of their carnivore feeding programs, as a way to appropriately meet the nutrient needs of the animals in their care. For the continued health and long-term sustainability of endangered and threatened carnivores, it is imperative that as many options as possible remain available to feed those animals, including horsemeat.

The previous use of USDA-inspected horsemeat meant that this meat was accompanied by more stringent inspection and labeling criteria than are currently applied to domestic animal grade horsemeat. Removing inspection, therefore, removed a domestic source of high quality, clean, and wholesome product for use in zoo carnivore diets, leading many zoos to turn to Canada, where horsemeat is still inspected. Currently, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) works closely with the meat industry to ensure federal food safety requirements are known, understood, and followed. This provides a measure of confidence to numerous AZA-accredited zoos that continue to use horsemeat (and horsemeat products) imported from Canada. In addition to quality, meat from inspected Canadian sources also ensures a level of humane oversight of the horses.

Many quality issues associated with horsemeat feeding can be greatly reduced or eliminated through the use of a federal inspection process and individual zoos monitoring the chain of custody and handling practices of their raw ingredients (neither of which happened in the most recent case in Reno).

Exotic carnivores have diverse nutritional needs. Appropriate consumption of raw diets is based on the type of meat, the species to which it is offered, and even the preferences of individuals within that species. Meats processed for domestic pet foods, which are heat-treated as part of the diet production process, have been proven inappropriate for zoo carnivore diets because they are not well digested by exotic carnivores. Thus, these products are not alternative food sources in the absence of human food quality meat. The provision of a raw meat diet (regardless of source) requires increased attention to food service sanitation that cannot be guaranteed in an uninspected food chain.

The zoo nutrition community supports the manufacture and distribution of multiple types of high-quality carnivore diet products – bovine, equine, porcine, etc. AZA-accredited zoos have worked closely with meat processors to define nutrient, ingredient, and handling specifications for these products to insure production of the best possible diets. In the last few years, the price per pound of appropriate carnivore diets (defined as “safe, wholesome, and nutrient managed to meet the needs of carnivores”) has increased due to simple economic principles and overall availability.

This has challenged zoos economically and some have had difficulty finding suitable replacement products for feeding their carnivores. Removing the ability to use horsemeat for zoo carnivore diets would reduce the options that all AZA-accredited zoos have to appropriately feed their carnivores, from both a nutritional and economic standpoint. The ramifications of such a change would likely reduce the numbers of individual carnivores zoos could maintain and/or encourage the increased use of sub-standard food items (both negatively impacting the ability of AZA to continue to manage carnivore populations in increasing numbers, or even at current levels).

We, as the Steering Committee for the AZA Nutrition Advisory Group, continue to support the availability of a wide variety of meat sources, including horsemeat, to allow the provision of the best diets for the animals in our care.