



TESTIMONY OF ELLEN WIEDNER, D.V.M.
DIRECTOR OF VETERINARY SERVICES
OPPOSITION TO H.B. 6555
JOINT COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT
CONNECTICUT GENERAL ASSEMBLY

MARCH 9, 2009

ENTERTAINMENT, INC.

Mr. Chairmen and Members of the committee, my name is Dr. Ellen Wiedner and I am the Director of Veterinary Services for Feld Entertainment, Inc., the parent company of *Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey*[®]. I am in my fifth year with *Ringling Bros.*[®] and am one of three full time staff veterinarians who care for all of *Ringling Bros.*' animals large and small. I am also a licensed veterinarian in good standing in the state of Connecticut and a member of the Connecticut Veterinary Medical Association.

HB 6555 would interfere with safe and proper elephant management by arbitrarily enacting restrictions for elephant care that are inconsistent with existing federal rules and the recognized industry standards and guidelines. It would also prevent our elephant handlers from continuing to care for and handle our elephants in a consistent manner that ensures animal safety and welfare.

In addition to my testimony we are submitting several attachments, including prior statements submitted by Feld Entertainment to the Environment Committee for hearings on similar legislation, letters of opposition from other parties and additional background information on our elephant conservation and animal care programs.

The use of guides and the tethering of elephants with chains are proven and humane management practices accepted by the US Department of Agriculture, under the Animal Welfare Act. These techniques are also approved by the American Veterinary Medical Association, the Association of Zoos and Aquarium, the International Elephant Foundation, and the Elephant Managers Association and are used by elephant handlers in zoos, preserves and circuses throughout the world.

The guide works primarily as an extension of the trainer's arm in conjunction with a voice command. For example, a touch on the side of the right leg with the command "foot", tells the elephant to lift its right foot. In training, it helps the elephants understand the meaning of verbal cues and in circumstances when noise or distractions prevent the elephant from hearing a verbal cue. The guide is a standard tool of animal handling, no different than the use of a leash and collar for a dog, or a bit and bridle for a horse. Just like those tools, when used properly the guide is safe and humane and does not harm the animal. The guide helps the trainer and elephant work together closely and this direct contact also improves my ability to work as a veterinarian for our elephants.

Tethering of elephants with chains is also part of responsible elephant care and governed by existing laws and regulations. The fact is that *Ringling Bros.* elephants spend most of their waking hours freely moving around. They are tethered for specific situations as part of their regular routines: at mealtimes, for example, when some elephants take food from others; at night to prevent active elephants from disturbing those who are asleep, and during certain medical procedures. Tethered

elephants have room to lie down, move around and interact with each other. The tethering simply ensures that the elephants respect each other's physical space. Metal chains are used because they are sanitary, do not abrade skin like straps or ropes, and because they don't tighten down like a noose, causing potentially dangerous constriction. The USDA mandates that elephants be tethered during transportation – and in this case the tethers are like seatbelts.

This legislation's limitation on the use of tethers would actually be detrimental to good elephant care. All animals, including elephants, need to be acclimated to restraints. It is unreasonable to expect any animal to submit to a form of restraint without regular prior experience or positive reinforcement. Our elephants associate the tethers with positive events such as mealtimes and sleep. And this, in turn means tethering for veterinary procedures -- which often aren't any animal's favorite experience – does not cause anxiety.

Ringling Bros. tethering practices are consistent with those prescribed by the USDA as well as those outlined in the *Elephant Husbandry Resource Guide*, published by the IEF and endorsed by the zoological community. This book reflects the recognized, state-of-the-art, industry standards for the safe and humane care and management of elephants and *Ringling Bros.* practices are consistent with its contents.

As part of our commitment to the preservation of Asian elephants, *Ringling Bros.* established the *Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Center for Elephant Conservation*®, a state-of-the-art facility in Florida dedicated to the retirement, study and breeding of this endangered species. Built upon 139 years of experience and expertise of working with elephants and exotic animals, the *Ringling Bros. Center for Elephant Conservation* has become a global focal point for the study of Asian elephants. The *Ringling Bros. Center* hosts researchers, academicians and conservationists to create new dialogue focused around animal care, conservation and health and to exchange knowledge. Experts from around the world visit the *Ringling Bros. Center* to study the Asian elephant. This center is completely funded by *Ringling Bros.* with a portion of every circus ticket sold going to support our efforts. Our breeding program to date is the most successful outside of Southeast Asia and we have welcomed twenty two calves into the world since our program's inception, including "Barack", our most recent birth, on January 19 and our first as a result of artificial insemination

All of our animals are regularly inspected by USDA as well as state and local animal welfare agencies. I have personally been present at a number of such inspections, and they are thorough and demanding. Anyone seeing our elephants will notice immediately how social and well-adjusted they are – which demonstrates the superb care they receive.

As the home of P.T. Barnum, Connecticut has a special historical relationship with our circus. The elephants of *Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey* have performed in Connecticut nearly every year since the show first appeared here in 1919. This long held tradition is one which also has an economic impact on the state. The average annual direct economic impact of our circus visits to Connecticut is approximately \$1.24 million- this is money that we spend in the state.

However, House Bill 6555 would prevent *Ringling Bros.* from continuing to bring our circuses to Connecticut by arbitrarily and unnecessarily prohibiting the use of elephant guides and tethers. At *Ringling Bros.* we make a huge commitment of resources not only to providing our elephants with the best possible care, but also to preserving this highly endangered species. Whatever its intentions, the proposed legislation would not be in the best interests of elephants. For that reason we oppose it.