

The Hon Ian Hunter MLC
Minister for Sustainability, Environment and Conservation
GPO Box 1047
Adelaide 5001

7 August, 2014

Dear Minister,

I am writing to you in my role as the chair of the Wildlife Ethics Committee, responsible for oversight of research activities involving animals carried out by staff of the South Australian Museum, Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources and Zoos SA. The work of this committee ensures that best practices relevant to animal research actions are followed in all such activities, and also exists to ensure public confidence in the treatment and handling of, especially, wildlife species that are the usual subjects of such research. Although formed initially to provide the necessary regulatory control for these three institutions, the WEC Committee also carries out an additional role for the Government of South Australia by overseeing work on wildlife carried out by other groups, such as private environmental assessment companies, that would otherwise have no way of certifying that their work is conducted in accordance with the best principles for the use of animals in research.

The WEC was formed following an initial period after the introduction of the legislation that set up such committees. At first the three wildlife research institutions attempted to operate under the umbrella of the Animal Ethics Committee of the then Institute of Medical and Veterinary Sciences. However the nature of the animal research carried out at the IMVS, mostly biomedical lab and domestic animal studies, was too different for a single committee to adequately supervise both research areas. As a consequence the WEC was established in the mid 90s as a distinct body with special expertise and responsibility for the Museum, Zoo and Environment Department.

The WEC is efficient in the terms of the 'Review of Statutory Authorities' of 2003, in that it exists for a clearly enunciated purpose which remains valid today and is ongoing. Its current status as a Statutory Committee ensures public confidence that its deliberations are objective and subject to ministerial scrutiny. As a guarantee of its mandate to represent the major relevant stakeholders, the WEC, like all SA animal ethics committees is comprised of a mix of members approved by you as minister, and comprising vets, researchers, animal welfare groups, animal care facility workers and independent members of the public.

The value to the Government and public of South Australia of the state's animal ethics committees was endorsed at a meeting of the Chairs of the state's Animal Ethics Committees on 6 August, chaired by Geoff Dandie, CEO of ANZCCART, the peak body that advises government and researchers on the appropriate treatment of animals that are used in scientific research and education. Crucially, the willingness of national and international funding and publishing bodies to accept a piece of animal research depends on that research having passed the scrutiny of an animal ethics committee. Abolition of the transparent, regulated system of oversight provided by the WEC would mean that scientific research on the conservation, evolution and behavior of native wildlife

carried out by three of the state's leading institutions would have to stop. Likewise, biomedical research involving animals would also grind to a halt in South Australia.

I would also like to endorse Mr Dandie's comments at the meeting on the essential role played by the DEWNR Animal Welfare Unit. This involvement of a government department in the running of our system of animal ethics committees ensures uniformly high standards and effective communications to promote a high level of efficiency in their collective deliberations.

The chairs of the animal ethics committees also considered possible modifications of how the committees might operate in the future. At present the fact that all animal ethics committees are Statutory Committees, directly responsible to you as Minister, may benefit public confidence that the state has a high degree of interest and control regarding the use of animals in research and education. Moves to alter the animal ethics Committees from Statutory Committees to locally appointed, institution-based committees may create the perception that the state has lessened its commitment to animal welfare in scientific research and education. On the other hand, institution based committees would still be subject to oversight by the Animal Welfare Unit, may operate more efficiently and be more in line with the way similar committees are established and run in other states. The meeting of ethics committee chairs could see merits in both future paths and would be willing to engage in further talks to explore whether or not such change in status would ultimately be of benefit to the state.



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