

Matt Rossell
Property owner in Portland, OR
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Testimony in favor of HB 3214 for the OR Legislature House Committee on Judiciary

Chair Kropf, Vice Chairs Anderson and Wallan, and members of the Committee,

My name is Matt Rossell, and I am a Portland property owner and taxpayer in Oregon.

I want to thank Representative Zach Hudson for sponsoring this important animal protection and public safety legislation and am in full support of HB 3214, a bill to prohibit wild animals from being forced to perform in circuses and other traveling acts.

I am also the Campaigns Manager for the Animal Legal Defense Fund, but the following testimony occurred long before my employment with this organization.

While working undercover as an animal abuse investigator, I secured a job as a tent worker at Walker Bros Circus to track Lota and Liz, two elephants leased for the season from a herd that had an outbreak of Tuberculosis (TB). These were the last two elephants still on the road from that group, despite their likelihood of also being sick with TB.

Lota was showing outward symptoms of TB—she was thin, often exhausted, and laying down during the day which is not typical elephant behavior. TB is zoonotic, transmissible between animals and people—so the fact they were putting kids on the elephant’s back for rides was recklessly dangerous.

I witnessed Liz suffer a severe elephant beating by Johnny Walker Jr., the elephant handler and circus owner’s son. He had a bad temper and everyone on the show was afraid of him, but especially the elephants. Her screams and the sound of the bullhook hitting her body echoed across the fairgrounds that night.

The organization I worked for was calling local and state authorities at every stop along the route to try to get someone to inspect and intervein on behalf of the elephants. This went on for a few weeks as we traveled at the end of the season though multiple Southern states, each day to a new location. Finally, the elephants were stopped at the Florida border and the circus was forced to take them off the road.

The bear act with Derrick Rosaire Jr. was another tragic situation. The bears spent long days stressed, pacing, and bored in tiny cages except for the few minutes they were performing. I will never forget how desperate the bears were for any kind of stimulation. They would go through the motions of the act, but all the while they were in the ring, their necks were strained

with noses in the air just trying to take in a new smell or get some satisfaction from their moment out of their jail cell. Absolutely heartbreaking.

One night the motorcycle the bears rode went off course, veered toward the stands, and crashed. Luckily, the bear jumped into the ring, not the crowd, because the audience had no barrier to protect them. It was such a close call that the motorcycle popped a child's balloon in the front row. One more in the extensive list of incidents that never get documented, but news stories over the years do chronicle animal escapes and attacks that have harmed and even killed circus workers and patrons alike.

One such headline was on August 5, 2015, in Lancaster, New Hampshire when the Walker Bros. Circus tent collapsed in a storm during a performance. A father and his young daughter were killed, and dozens of other audience members were injured. Reports detail how the circus did not have the legally required permits to set up the tent, and this may have been the last time Walker Bros. Circus performed.

Although these specific stories are dated, the circus industry's treatment of animals and the inherent risks to both animals and people remains the same, including those circuses which come to Oregon. In my past two decades working in the animal protection field, I am aware of and helped manage many more similar investigations. The training, husbandry, living conditions, and travel for animals forced to perform have not improved in all that time.

What is thankfully changing is our understanding of and compassion for the needs of wild animals. There is no way to meet the complex physical, social, and behavioral needs of wild animals or ensure public safety in circuses and traveling shows with wild animal acts.

Please protect animals and public safety by supporting this important bill, HB 3214.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Matt Rossell", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Matt Rossell