

Exotic Animals and Exhibition of Wild Animals in Idaho

Idaho Animal Rescue Network | May 14, 2025



Idaho's system for regulating exotic and wild animals is a confusing tangle of agencies. Exotic Animals and Exhibition of Wild Animals in Idaho are slipping through the cracks as a result.

Idaho's system for regulating exotic and wild animals is a confusing tangle of agencies. Multiple state departments handle permits, inspections, and enforcement, each with their own rules, and to make it more complicated, the USDA also plays a role in some cases. Unfortunately, instead of moving toward stronger protections, Idaho has taken steps backward. In 2023, lawmakers passed Senate Bill 1084, a bill designed to help Yellowstone Bear World continue operating without state-level oversight. It's just one more example of how animal welfare continues to be overlooked in Idaho, especially when it comes to the ownership and exhibition of exotic and wild animals.

Regulations

In order to possess a deleterious exotic animal, which is defined as "any live animal that is not native to the state and is deemed by the Administrator of the Idaho State Department of Agriculture to be dangerous to the environment, livestock, agriculture, or wildlife."

(1) Prior to purchasing, importing, breeding, or otherwise possessing a deleterious exotic animal in Idaho, one must contact the Animal Industries Division of the Idaho State Department of Agriculture. Importing an animal requires a Certificate of Veterinary Inspection (CVI) and an entry permit. (2)

In order to exhibit an exotic animal on a temporary basis (30 days), an application to the Idaho State Department of Agriculture is required (3)

Warm-blooded animals, with the exception of some laboratory-related rodents, are regulated by the US Department of Agriculture. Animal exhibitors must be licensed by the US Department of Agriculture and are subject to inspection by the US Department of Agriculture

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. (4)

Enforcement

While permits for possession, importation, and exhibition are administered by the Idaho State Department of Agriculture, enforcement falls to the county sheriff's office for exotic animals.

Deaths of aquatic life at state aquariums must be reported to the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, and according to one former Idaho Department of Fish and Game biologist, such facilities must hold a permit from the department. (5) There was no information on the target=" _blank">Idaho Department of Fish and Game website about permitting for aquariums. Complaints about the welfare of aquatic life at facilities (zoos, aquariums) in Idaho can be made to the Idaho Department of Fish and Game. (5)

Reports and complaints of mistreatment based on violations of the Federal Animal Welfare Act can also be made to the US Department of Agriculture. (6)

Increasingly Permissive Legislation in Idaho

In 2023, the Idaho Legislature passed Senate Bill 1084, which reduced oversight of wildlife parks by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game if the park holds a Class C exhibitor license from the US Department of Agriculture and has been in business for over 20 years. This exempts US Department of Agriculture-licensed facilities from oversight concerning captive wildlife, including reporting requirements relating to the import, export, birth, and death of animals. (7) The bill was written by Yellowstone Bear World [see below], which has been under scrutiny for years for its treatment of captive bears and bear cubs. (8)

Animal Exhibits with Multiple Complaints

Yellowstone Bear World, a drive-through bear experience in Rexburg, Idaho, has been in operation since 1998. As of 2021, "Bear World present[ed] itself as a wildlife shelter that provides a safe place for bears to live, but in reality prioritizes profits at the cost of the physical and mental well-being of the animals." (9) "Though Bear World operates by showing animals to the public, it does not have accreditation from the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, instead operating under a certification of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which has lower standards for animal care. The facility also has a USDA Class C (exhibitor) license, which allows it to breed animals, exhibit, buy, and sell them. (10)

Bear Cubs at Yellowstone Bear World in Rexburg, Idaho (TripAdvisor)

It features a controversial cub bottle-feeding experience that critics say is facilitated by the premature and harmful separation of cubs from their mothers. "According to one former employee, however, cubs born at Bear World are taken from their mothers at just one or two months old. They said animal keepers care for the animals in a shared house on the park's property, taking turns bottle-feeding them around the clock. The idea, according to the animal keeper, was to acclimate the cubs early to being handled by humans. Two former employees said that once the cubs were separated from their mothers, they were never reintroduced to the sows." (11)

"Over the years, the facility has received several citations for violations including underfeeding animals, failing to provide adequate veterinary care, including proper vaccinations, and failing to maintain a primary enclosure in good repair, according to a factsheet compiled by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals." (12) After a bear escape incident, "Gregg Losinski, a bear expert who was the regional conservation educator for the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, said the department was never told of the incident of the bear escaping, and that he only learned about it from Anderson's book. 'We were not kept in the loop regarding their bears,' Losinski said. "Clearly there were things happening there that we were not aware of." (13)

Yellowstone Bear World has claimed that its bear cubs remain at the facility, but "records show it has sent bear cubs to various facilities with controversial histories, including one featured in the Netflix documentary series 'Tiger King.' "Transfer records with various states, however, show at least 96 bears have been sold to other facilities since 2009."

"Bear World President Courtney Ferguson told the Deseret News the facility only trades animals with USDA-certified institutions and the primary purpose is to keep genetics diverse and prevent inbreeding. 'It's standard practice in the industry,' he said. 'I see nothing wrong with it.' (14)

However, "among those facilities that received bears from Bear World were Greater Wynnewood Animal Park, formerly owned by Joseph Maldonado-Passage, more commonly known as 'Joe Exotic,' which received four black bear cubs in April 2013. He was convicted in 2019 on 17 counts of animal abuse and two counts of attempted murder. Another was Bear Country USA in South Dakota, which received two black bear cubs aged at two and a half months. In 2006, two members of the family that owns Bear Country were convicted in federal court for illegally selling bear gallbladders to a business that sold 'specialty gourmet products.'" The vast majority of bears, 84 in total, were transported to Woody's Menagerie, in Mulberry Grove, Illinois, owned by Gregg Woody." "Woody was investigated by the USDA in 2016 for poor veterinary care for animals, providing inadequate space for bears and big cats, and failure to provide proper shelter for the animals during the winter." "Idaho Department of

Agriculture records show Bear World shipped more than 30 bears to Woody between 2017 and 2021.” (15)

East Idaho Aquarium had a reputation for mistreatment of its aquatic life and and birds before allegedly rehabilitating its operation between 2021 and 2023, “when animal deaths were reduced by 73%” In 2024, a group of whistleblowers spoke out about their experience at the aquarium and “contacted People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) with concerns about overcrowding, inadequate care for sick fish, and a high mortality rate” including the deaths of over 2,000 fish and animals in the in less than three years. PETA cited records that the aquarium submitted to the Idaho Department of Fish and Game. According to former Idaho Department of Fish and Game biologist, Matt Pieron, “Idaho Fish and Game administers permits for facilities like aquariums and reviews animals in captivity and the import and export of animals to such facilities. The department can perform facility inspections at its discretion.” (16)

Babby Farms, owned by TRACE Inc., in Caldwell, Idaho, touts animals from around the world, including a camel, coatimundis, otters, several species of primates, horses, kangaroos, and colorful birds from the far reaches of the globe. Because many of the animals are “hand-raised,” visitors can get up close to enclosures, unlike at traditional zoos. As of November 2021, a group of former Babby Farms employees “made allegations of poor animal care and dangerous conditions for employees, volunteers, and guests who visited the farm.” Separately, a Change.org petition to shut down the farm gathered over 15,000 signatures. Former employees complained that low staffing levels made it “challenging to keep enclosures appropriately cleaned.” They also noted “a lack of animal enrichment, and what they called improper safety measures to prevent employees and guests from injury.” Other employees “described poor nutrition and several animal deaths they say were preventable.” “Three employees interviewed said the farm regularly operated when temperatures were above 100 degrees, potentially making the farm dangerous for animals and guests due to the lack of shade.” Babby Farms denied the allegations, but ultimately did not grant an interview or tour to BoiseDev. (17)

A bobcat in its enclosure at Babby Farms, highlighting concerns about enclosure conditions.

“After the social media criticism and a flood of complaints hit the desk of the Idaho Department of Agriculture, the state sent inspectors with veterinary expertise to Babby

Farms to do an unannounced visit. Staff from the Idaho Department of Fish and Game and the Gem County Sheriff's Office were also on the tour. The facility passed with flying colors, according to documents obtained by BoiseDev in a public records request. Inspectors checked out 102 animals at Babby Farms, noting their weight, cleanliness of the pens, and their behavior. All of them earned good marks." (18)

The operation's course correction did not last long, as in February 2022, the US Department of Agriculture issued an official warning after their inspectors learned during a January 6, 2022, inspection that two people had been bitten by animals on site. The same inspection also turned up concerns about how animals were housed near each other without a sufficient barrier between cages, allowing animals to fight. This was not a disciplinary action, but now that a warning has been issued, it allows the USDA to pursue civil penalties, criminal charges, or other sanctions if there are future violations of federal guidance on the care of animals. Babby Farms has its animal exhibition license from the USDA and is subject to surprise visits from inspectors. (19)

Advocacy

- In September 2024, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals filed suit against the East Idaho Aquarium. (20)
- In July 2024, the Animal Legal Defense Fund filed lawsuits against the US Department of Agriculture and its Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service for issuing an exhibitor's license under the Animal Welfare Act to Yellowstone Bear World (21)
- In May 2024, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals sent a letter to the Idaho Attorney General's Office alleging violations of the Idaho Consumer Protection Act by Yellowstone Bear World. (22)
- In November 2021, former Babby Farms employee Gabrielle Derrey started a Change.org petition to draw attention to and shut down Babby Farms, alleging mistreatment of animals and at least one animal death. (23)

Small Success Stories

- In August 2024, "An animal attraction at the Western Idaho Fair near Boise closed and was replaced with a different attraction after fair officials were made aware that its federal license had expired." (24) In September 2024, "federal officials cited two animal exhibitors for violating a federal law on animal welfare when their otter show performed at the Western Idaho Fair, according to an inspection report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Services. Gregg and Karen Woody, who operated the Otter Adventure show in the Boise area with five Asian small-clawed otters, did not have an exhibitor license that's required to show wild animals, as required under

the Animal Welfare Act.” “The report said an inspector observed the show on Aug. 21. “The report noted that failing to have a license prevents the agency from assessing the well-being and care of the animals. The inspector wrote that continuing the exhibit without a license is ‘a serious violation of the Animal Welfare Act.’” (25)

As concerns were coming to light, “Idaho State Department of Agriculture spokesperson Sydney Kennedy told the Statesman the agency does not regulate animal exhibits but was ‘aware of the otter shipment’ for the exhibit. Kennedy said it met state animal import requirements, which mandate a certificate of veterinary inspection for all animals.” (24)

- In March 2023, a People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals complaint against Yellowstone Bear World resulted in an OSHA penalty. (26)

(1) IDAPA 02.04.27, Rules Governing Deleterious Exotic Animals(2)

target="_blank"><https://agri.idaho.gov/animals/imports-exports/wildlife-exotic-imports/>(3)

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<https://www.aphis.usda.gov/sites/default/files/Animal-Care-Inspection-Guide.pdf>(5)

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<https://investigations.peta.org/yellowstone-bear-world/>Idaho Animal Rescue Network (2025):

We want to extend our sincere thanks to the dedicated volunteer who researched and authored this article. Though they've chosen to remain anonymous, we are incredibly grateful for their work in helping bring these important issues to light.

Source & Contact

Current story:

<https://idahorescue.com/2025/05/14/exotic-animals-and-exhibition-of-wild-animals-in-idaho/>

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