

**Dear Secretary of State,**

On behalf of conservation zoos and aquariums across the UK, we would like to congratulate you on your appointment. Your role as head of DEFRA is enormously important to our sector, and we look forward to building a positive and constructive relationship with you, as we did with your predecessor, Steve Reed.

We appreciate this will be a particularly busy period as you take on a new portfolio but would respectfully like to draw your attention to an ongoing situation which, if unresolved, could have serious repercussions.

Since 2021, zoos and aquariums have only been able to transfer around a fifth of the number of animals between the UK and EU compared with pre-Brexit levels. We are grateful for the efforts of your officials to address this challenge, particularly through the inclusion of conservation zoos in the recent SPS agreement, due to come into effect in 2026.

However, one of the most pressing barriers currently facing the sector relates to restrictions introduced last winter by DEFRA to prevent the spread of Bluetongue virus. While we fully support measures to protect the UK from infectious diseases — and have a long record of working with DEFRA to ensure biosecurity standards are met — the guidance on importing non-domestic ungulates from the EU into approved bodies has had the unintended consequence of making such imports practically impossible.

For example, the current requirement for imported animals to undergo a minimum 30-day quarantine in ‘vector-protected’ facilities presents significant challenges. Firstly, no clear definition has been provided on what exactly constitutes a ‘vector-protected’ facility, despite repeated requests for clarification. Secondly, it is neither practical nor in line with animal welfare best practice to confine large ungulates such as giraffes, rhinos, and elephants in sealed facilities that exclude flies and other insects.

This lack of clarity has compounded the wider transfer issues already in place and has, in effect, blocked the import of non-domestic ruminants into the UK. This limits our participation in international breeding programmes, creates a backlog of animals unable to move across the continent, and ultimately impacts animal welfare. If left unresolved, this situation could also lead to the loss of some of the world’s rarest and most charismatic animals from the UK, disrupting conservation projects in the process.

You may be aware that representatives from across our sector have been trying to constructively engage with DEFRA and APHA officials for months now, but no significant progress has been made. I attach a letter which was sent to your predecessor, following his visit to London Zoo in July, which outlined the background to the issue and what action needed to be taken. Unfortunately, the backlog has only gotten worse since then. The Zoological Society of London (ZSL) even contracted researchers from the Pirbright

Institute to publish a paper which outlines practical methods of vector-proofing small animal housing, which was submitted to DEFRA but has not been adopted.

We therefore urgently request:

- a revision of the current legislation,
- the introduction of a vaccination/derogation arrangement for zoos and confined establishments, or
- the establishment of clear and achievable requirements for vector-protected facilities at the premises of destination.

We would be very happy to meet again with your officials to help to enact these changes. Please do utilise the expertise and experience in our sector.

Any support you can provide in resolving this issue would make a real and immediate difference to conservation projects across the UK and help protect some of the world's most endangered species.

Yours sincerely,

David Field, CEO of Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (RZSS)

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'D. Field'.

Matthew Gould, CEO of Zoological Society of London (ZSL)

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Matthew Gould'.

Myfanwy Griffith, Executive Director of the European Association of Zoos and Aquariums (EAZA)

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Myfanwy Griffith'.

Dr Jo Judge, CEO of British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums (BIAZA)

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