



Animal and Plant
Health Inspection
Service

May 14, 2020

4700 River Road
Riverdale, MD 20737

USDA ADVISORY NOTE

TO: All Zoos and Facilities Holding Big Cats

RE: Limiting close contact between members of the public and nondomestic cats

HISTORY:

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Veterinary Services Laboratories confirmed that cases of SARS-CoV-2 infection (the virus that causes COVID-19) were found through testing samples from two big cats living in a zoological institution in New York. Public health officials believe these large cats became sick after being exposed to a zoo employee who was actively shedding virus. Additionally, preliminary findings from limited laboratory experimental studies indicate that they are among the species most susceptible to infection with SARS-CoV-2, and that big cats have exhibited obvious clinical disease.

ADVISORY:

To protect the health and welfare of susceptible felids (the group that includes wild cats such as tigers, lions and cheetahs) exhibitors and dealers should consult their Attending Veterinarians. The following are general guidelines and any alternative measures should be discussed with your Attending Veterinarian:

- All keepers working with these animals should don extra protective equipment and practice physical distancing when possible.
- Members of the public should maintain a distance of at least 6 feet from nondomestic cats and optimally, be required to wear a mask when in the vicinity.
- Hands-on encounters with nondomestic cats should be suspended until it can be assured that members of the public do not pose any risk of infection to the animals. Furthermore, the animals used for hands-on public contact could serve as fomites and could be a vehicle for infecting people coming in direct contact with their fur. While animal fur is less likely to harbor the virus than smooth surfaces, people handling animals within a few minutes-to-hours of one another could pose a risk of transmitting the infection. The use of disinfectants applied directly to the animal in an attempt to disinfect the fur could result in serious health issues and should not be used.