May 12, 2011

The Honorable ______________________
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative:

As the largest coalition of biomedical research associations in the United States, representing 23 societies and over 100,000 scientists and engineers, the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB) is writing to urge you to withdraw your support for the Great Ape Protection and Cost Savings Act (H.R. 1513). As you know, this bill would ban medical research involving bonobos, gorillas, gibbons, orangutans, and chimpanzees based in part on the questionable premise that doing so would save money. Please do not be misled by the addition of the “cost savings” language in the title of the bill. The vast majority of the savings would be attributable to cutting research grants involving chimpanzees—not for their care. The cost to the American people of not continuing this important research hugely outweighs the dubious savings alluded to in the bill.

Numerous laws, regulations, and voluntary accreditation organizations ensure that research involving great apes is subject to thorough ethical consideration and rigorous oversight. Prior to any study involving great apes, a committee determines whether the study question being asked is scientifically sound, determines whether the animal model proposed is the most appropriate to answer the study question, ensures that pain and distress of the animal is minimized, and makes certain that the animals are cared for humanely. For example, the Animal Welfare Act requires that chimpanzees in a laboratory setting be socially housed with other chimpanzees and be provided with environmental enrichments such as perches, mirrors, and swings. And in most research facilities, chimpanzees have access to outdoor space. Further, federal laws mandated the creation of sanctuaries to house chimpanzees no longer being utilized in research. Within these sanctuaries, chimpanzees are housed in social groups and provided with a high level of veterinary care until their natural deaths.

It is within this context that chimpanzee research has led to major medical advances. National Institutes of Health Director, Dr. Francis Collins, responding to a Congressional query about the need for chimpanzees in biomedical research pointed out that, “Chimpanzees proved invaluable in developing the hepatitis A and B vaccines that are in use today.” Collins went on to note that these vaccines have significantly reduced the frequency of infection of hepatitis A and B in the U.S.

The prohibition of medical research involving chimpanzees would end studies with
the purpose of developing a vaccine for hepatitis C. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately 17,000 Americans are infected with the hepatitis C virus each year, and chronic infection is a leading cause of liver transplantation due to liver failure. It is estimated that the cost of liver transplantations due to hepatitis C complications will reach $300 million per year in the U.S. Development of a vaccine for hepatitis C would significantly reduce health care costs and ultimately save money. While there are other animal models available to study some aspects of the acute hepatitis C infection process, chimpanzees remain the only model validated to study chronic hepatitis C.

Research on great apes also remains crucial for progress against malaria, human cytomegalovirus, respiratory syncytial virus, and development of important life saving monoclonal antibodies. One such monoclonal antibody therapy is used to treat those afflicted with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, a form of cancer that resulted in over 20,000 deaths in 2010. Because the biological receptors targeted by the antibodies are found only on chimpanzee and human cells, chimpanzees are a key study species.

It is important to note that research involving great apes is also essential in the development of countermeasures in the event of a deliberate bioterrorist attack. Filoviruses like Ebola and Marburg, which have average mortality rates of greater than 50 percent, have been classified as Category A bioterrorism agents by the CDC. Without the ability to test and develop prophylactic and therapeutic strategies against these deadly viruses using great apes, we may be left defenseless.

Enacting the Great Ape Protection and Cost Savings Act would not only prohibit research that benefits humans, it would also prohibit research for the benefit of great apes. Chimpanzees and gorillas in the wild are being ravaged by the Ebola virus. This past February, the first studies were conducted on laboratory chimpanzees to test the safety of a potential vaccine against Ebola, which could be used to protect wild chimpanzees and gorillas from this deadly disease. If adopted, this bill will not only prevent the needed research for human diseases, but it will prevent research for these animals—inevitably harming the ones the legislation seeks to protect.

FASEB appreciates the importance of minimizing the number of animals used in research. This bill, however, goes too far by completely eliminating the current and future use of great apes. The Institute of Medicine, in conjunction with the National Research Council, is conducting a study to assess whether chimpanzees continue to be needed in biomedical and behavioral research. To completely eliminate the use of these animals in important public health research prior to the committee’s conclusions is premature and may inhibit medical advances and our quest to improve human and animal health through new treatments and vaccines. We, therefore, urge you not to support the passage of the Great Ape Protection and Cost Savings Act.

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