

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

June 5, 2024

Shannon Estenoz
Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Martha Williams
Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Assistant Secretary Estenoz and Director Williams:

The House Committee on Natural Resources (Committee) is investigating actions taken by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) during an effort named “Operation Long-Tail Liberation.” It is the understanding of the Committee this internal investigation operated by the Service was undertaken to address claims of illegal smuggling of wild primates into the United States. The Committee is concerned with reports of alarming practices undertaken by agents in the Service’s Office of Law Enforcement during this internal investigation.¹ The behaviors of Service employees and contractors during the Service’s internal investigation raise serious concerns regarding waste, fraud, and abuse of taxpayer funds.²

As you know, the long-tailed macaque, a monkey native to Asia, is included in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna (CITES).³ They are also in heavy demand by biomedical laboratories, including in the United States, for use in testing pharmaceutical products.⁴ Special permits are required to import macaques into the U.S., as they are listed in the CITES appendices.⁵ While legal trade primarily involves captive-bred long-tailed macaques, wild-caught individuals can also be legally traded if captured with the local government’s permission.⁶

¹ See, e.g., Michael Doyle, Cambodian Official Acquitted in Macaque Smuggling Case, EE Daily, March 26, 2024, <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2024/03/26/cambodian-official-acquitted-in-macaque-smuggling-case-00148865>

² *Id.*

³ See <https://cites.org/eng/taxonomy/term/1132>

⁴ EE Daily, March 26, 2024. See also Case 1:22-cr-20340-KMW, *United States v. Masphal Kry*, Trial Transcript 3-12-24 PM Fuentes Direct pp 13-14, March 12, 2024

⁵ See <https://cites.org/eng/disc/how.php>, How CITES Works.

⁶ *Id.*

At issue in this matter is an investigation by Service law enforcement agents of activities carried out in the Kingdom of Cambodia (Cambodia) relating to the purported trade of wild long-tailed macaques. In carrying out the so-called “Operation Long Tail Liberation,” the Service relied on a paid informant to surreptitiously gather information outside of the United States, in Cambodia, without the knowledge of the Cambodian Government. The information gathered by the paid informant would become the basis of indictments for illegally importing macaques into the U.S.⁷

The paid informant, Veng Lim Yeung (Yeung), whom the Service nicknamed “Francis,” was a Chinese national working at a primate facility in Cambodia.⁸ Sarah Kite, an employee of Cruelty-Free International, a London environmental organization, introduced the Service to Yeung.⁹ Yeung had originally contacted Cruelty-Free International in search of a salary.¹⁰

Throughout the investigation, the Service paid Yeung hundreds of thousands of dollars. In court records, Yeung admitted to receiving almost \$225,000 from the Service.¹¹ In addition, as part of that investigation, Yeung admitted to installing spyware on a computer at his place of employment,¹² providing access to a security camera at the gate of the facility to Service agents,¹³ and stealing a visitor logbook from his employer,¹⁴ among other actions.

Following his work for the United States in Cambodia, the U.S. government paid Yeung and his family to relocate to the U.S.,¹⁵ and it provided him with a bank account and housing assistance.¹⁶ The Service also aided Yeung in obtaining authorization to work in the United States.¹⁷ All of this was at significant expense to the taxpayer and the Service’s programs.

The details of Operation Long Tail Liberation are highly concerning to the Committee. Rather than utilizing standard processes available under CITES and international laws, the Service conducted a covert operation in Cambodia without notifying the national government. In addition, it is unclear what policies the Service has to guide engagement with and vetting paid informants in these types of investigations. In this instance, it is clear from his own words and actions that a possible motivation for Yeung, the paid informant, was to seek payment from anyone who would hire him.¹⁸

⁷ See Case 1:22-cr-20340-KMW, *United States v. Masphal Kry*, Exhibit A to Defendant’s Masphal Kry’s Reply in Support of Motion to Conduct Depositions Pursuant to Fed. R. Crim. P.15 from the lawsuit for a concise description of these issues, which are also discussed in court transcripts.

⁸ Trial Transcript 3-15-24 PM Manera Direct pp 65 et seq, March 15, 2024.

⁹ *Id.* at 64-65.

¹⁰ Trial Transcript 3-14-24 AM Yeung Direct pp 189-190, March 14, 2024.

¹¹ *Id.* at 193.

¹² Trial Transcript 3-15-24 AM Yeung Cross Examination p. 16, March 15, 2024.

¹³ *Id.* at 13.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 16-17.

¹⁵ Trial Transcript 3-15-24 PM Manera Direct p 82, March 15, 2024.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 85-87.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 87.

¹⁸ Trial Transcript 3-14-24 AM Yeung Direct Examination pp 182-184, March 14, 2024.

Court records also call into question the adequacy of the Service's background investigations before hiring Yeung as a paid informant. For example, during proceedings to acquire U.S. citizenship, Yeung signed an affidavit that excluded the fact that he had previously been married to another Chinese National.¹⁹ Yueng failed to provide this information to Service law enforcement agents, nor was this revealed in any background checks or clearances that the Service or other federal agency performed during his vetting as a paid informant.²⁰ Yeung also admitted in court to smuggling hundreds of wild-caught monkeys while working for the Service.²¹

There are also fundamental questions about whether the Service's investigation against officials in the Cambodian government was legal and whether it followed Service policies and guidance. For example, during the investigation, Yeung admitted to stealing electronic records from his employer for the Service, installing a computer program on office computers to allow the Service to watch surveillance cameras at the primate facility, and purchasing recording devices and secret cameras to record meetings and events, all without authorization from his employer or the Cambodian government.²²

Other actions raise questions about whether the Service followed basic recordkeeping and secure systems requirements. For example, while it is clear that they were not promptly forthcoming at trial with communications between Service agents and the paid informant, there is also significant confusion about the disclosure of text messages and other communications between the Service and Yeung and the destruction of some records of communication during the investigation.²³ Details of the investigation released subsequent court proceedings raise questions about the use of a Google Drive established by Yeung for the sharing of information procured during the investigation between Yeung and Service agents.²⁴

Finally, this matter raises significant questions about the Service's relationships with Cruelty-Free International and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). It is important to understand what discussions took place between these organizations and the Service that resulted in the Service hiring Yeung as a paid informant and whether any information relating to this matter was improperly shared with these organizations.²⁵

The Committee is concerned that the facts of this matter show an agency program run wild, with little scrutiny or oversight and a disregard for the law and international norms. To assist the Committee with effective management of America's public land management agencies, including general oversight of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to prevent waste, fraud, and abuse of taxpayer dollars, provide the following records, documents, communications, or information, in electronic form, as soon as possible, but no later than June 19, 2024:

¹⁹ *Id.* at 166-171.

²⁰ Trial Transcript 3-15-24 AM Yeung Cross Examination p. 35, March 15, 2024.

²¹ *Id.* at 27.

²² Trial Transcript 3-15-24 AM Yeung Cross Examination p. 13 et seq, March 15, 2024.

²³ Trial Transcript 3-13-24 pp. 34 et seq. ; Trial Transcript 3-14-24 AM pp. 8-20.

²⁴ Trial Transcript 3-15-24 PM Manera Direct p. 71.

²⁵ See, e.g., Trial Transcript 3-13-24 AM p. 5.

1. All policies and guidance applicable to the engagement with potential informants, including potential paid informants, by the Service, including for the hiring, vetting, and compensation of informants;
2. All documents and communications between employees of the Service, PETA, and Cruelty-Free International regarding Veng Lim Yeung, otherwise known as Francis Yeung, including communications about any payments or other arrangements related to his work with the Service;
3. All documents and communications between employees of the Service, PETA, Born Free, and Cruelty-Free International regarding Operation Long Tail Liberation;
4. All documents and communications between the Service and Veng Lim Yeung related to his role as an informant for the Service;
5. All documents and communications between employees of the Service, and communications between Service employees and other officials within the Department of the Interior, related to the role of Veng Lim Yeung as an informant for the Service, including those related to:
 - a. the approval of payments to Yeung by the Service for his service as an informant in this matter; and
 - b. the decision to move Yeung and his family to the United States and all actions undertaken by Service employees related to that matter.
6. All documents and communications related to any background investigations or clearances performed on Veng Lim Yeung related to his role as an informant for the Service;

In addition, the Committee requests the following records related to the Service's Law Enforcement activities:

1. Copies of all policies and guidance applicable to the Service when carrying out investigations in foreign countries and indicating when and how the Service shall interact with foreign government officials during the course of its investigations;
2. Copies of all policies and guidance related to surveillance and other undercover activities carried out by the Service, including –
 - a. when carrying out undercover activities against foreign officials; and
 - b. regarding the approval and use of spyware and other surveillance tools by the Service;
3. All documents and communications between Service employees regarding the decision to proceed with undercover operations involving Veng Lim Yeung and the approval of those operations;
4. All documents and communications related to the Service's decision to forego or undertake actions against Cambodia for the potential illegal trade of long-tailed macaques under CITES or any other U.S. Law or Treaty;
5. All documents and communications within the Service and the Department of the Interior related to the destruction of records, including the erasure of telephone communications, emails or text messages related to this matter;

6. All policies and guidance issued by the Service or the Department of the Interior on the use of non-government Information Technology platforms, such as Google Drive and Google email accounts, by government employees;
7. All documents and communications by Service employees about the use of Google Drive and Google email accounts to communicate and share documents and information with Veng Lim Yeung;
8. All documents and communications between employees of the Service and the Department of the Interior with any employee of PETA, Born Free, and Cruelty-Free International relating in any way to this matter, including, but not limited to, Operation Long Tail Liberation;
9. All documents and communications between the Service, the Department of the Interior, the Internal Revenue Service, the State Department, and any other federal agency relating in any way to this matter.

An attachment to this letter provides additional instructions for responding to the requests from the Committee on Natural Resources. Please contact the Majority staff for the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee at (202) 225-2761 or HNRR.Oversight@mail.house.gov with any questions. Under House Rule X, the Committee on Natural Resources has “general oversight” of any matter relating to its jurisdiction, including all matters concerning the programs and operations of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Sincerely,



Bruce Westerman
Chairman
Committee on Natural Resources



Paul A. Gosar, D.D.S.
Chairman
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations