November 3, 2021

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We request that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) take immediate steps to update the handling and care standards for captive marine mammals and ensure such standards reflect the most up-to-date science.

Nearly four decades have passed since the USDA last updated key elements of the handling and care standards for marine mammals in 1984. Since then, significant progress has been made in marine mammal biology and ecology, which should inform federal care regulations, such as increasing minimum space requirements, establishing species-specific ambient temperature ranges, and mitigating the effects of noise.

Updating the minimum space requirements is especially critical to improve the welfare of captive marine mammals. Research within the past 20 years indicates that marine mammals in the wild move far more widely than was previously understood, including diving to astounding depths. For example, a 2015 study by researchers at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and University of Washington Seattle found that belugas routinely dive to 2,000 feet, yet the current minimum required depth for this species in captivity is only 7 feet.

Urgent action is needed to ensure the approximately 1,400 captive marine mammals are adequately protected. We urge you to prioritize the development of a humane and science-based rule to modernize the outdated marine mammal regulations for these highly intelligent and social animals.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,

Dianne Feinstein  
United States Senator

Jared Huffman  
Member of Congress  
Chair, Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife