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Australian Senate
Senate's Committee
for Environment and Communications

3rd February 2016

Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Amendment (Prohibition of Live Imports of Primates for Research) Bill 2015

Dear members of the committee/To whom it may concern

We are writing to you as members of the Executive of the International Basel Declaration Society (BDS), which is a grassroots organization for promoting good practice and transparency in Life Science research worldwide (see www.basel-declaration.org).

We are writing to you regarding a proposed amendment in the law to ban the importation of all non-human primates to Australia for the purposes of scientific research. As we understand, Australian law already prohibits the importation of wild-caught animals and thus non-human primates can only be imported from lawful breeding colonies abroad. The proposed changes in the law, however, would ban importation even of non-human primates from certified breeding colonies. This will ultimately have a deleterious affect on the three government-funded Australian breeding colonies (for baboons, macaques and marmosets), due to inbreeding, and consequent increased disease-risk and loss of fertility. The possibility for Australia to maintain its innovative research programs involving non-human primates may thus be severely compromised.

But why is research with non-human primates so vital, although non-human primates involve only a tiny fraction of animals used in biomedical research? In Australian research laboratories, as elsewhere, non-human primates form a key bridge from results obtained in cell cultures, or in lower mammals like mice, to knowledge that can actually be applied in humans. Traditionally, Australian scientists have made a disproportionate contribution to biomedical research internationally. Current Australian research with non-human primates covers an impressive breadth, including endocrinology, immunology, and neuroscience, all areas in which progress has recently accelerated, mainly due to the introduction of novel approaches, particularly in gene-based technologies and imaging. Thus, many novel approaches to treatment for medical disorders, such as gene therapy and stem cell transplants, could not be developed and tested without research in non-human primates. It is no surprise that huge investments now being made in their non-human primate research programs by countries like Japan and China.

Making progress in understanding health and disease is a collaborative effort of scientists around the globe and Australian scientists have more than played their part. We are concerned that this proposed new law will compromise not only the existing successful programs, but discourage the brightest and best young scientists from pursuing their important future work on non-human primates in Australia. We thus believe that after due consideration that this proposal an outright ban on import of non-human primates from certified breeding colonies will be seen to be against the best interests of Australian biomedical research and the international community that depends on their research.

Sincerely,

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