



## **Guidance for working around felid species during the SARS CoV-2 pandemic**

December 14, 2020

Dear Colleagues

Now that we are many months into the COVID19 pandemic and cases in humans are high and increasing in many places across North America, we are reaching out to AZA institutions with felid species to update and remind you of the risk not only to yourselves and your loved ones, but also to the cats in your care.

To date, natural SARS CoV-2 infection has been diagnosed in several dozen domestic cats worldwide and in four species of non-domestic cats (tiger, lion, puma, and now snow leopard) in zoological institutions around the world (USA, South Africa, Spain). Cases to date in non-domestic felids have resulted in mild respiratory disease and general malaise. No fatalities have been reported to date. Several of the recent cases occurred since the initiation of institutional COVID19 protocols in zoological institutions for working around at-risk species.

Although there is still much that we don't know about this virus, felid species appear to be more susceptible to becoming infected and developing clinical signs than some other species. Prevention of spread between humans and non-domestic felids remains imperative. As the human case numbers rise, the risk of exposure to our zoo cats increases as well.

The Felid TAG strongly recommends that each facility perform a comprehensive risk assessment and review on a periodic basis to assess risk in light of current and changing community transmission rates and infection risk.

This includes evaluation of:

- PPE management and disinfection protocols:
  - o Face masks should be worn at all times when working in proximity to and in the same airspace as felids and when preparing diets.
  - o We now know that droplet and aerosol transmission are the most important routes of transmission, so a review of building ventilation and HVAC function should be performed.
  - o Contact transmission via surfaces may play a lesser role but attention should still be given to frequently contacted surfaces in both keeper and cat spaces and include fomites (food bowls, enrichment items, etc.).
- Staff access to felid spaces should be limited to essential personnel as much as possible and with human and animal safety in mind.
- Assessment of proximity to cats (e.g. implementing social distancing - 6' minimum) whenever possible, including during:
  - o Training
  - o Enrichment activities
  - o Shifting
  - o Feeding
  - o Veterinary procedures
- Health screening of staff with access to felids including:
  - o Pro-active evaluation to identify infected staff as early as possible and to ensure that safe working environments can be maintained.
  - o Staff travel to areas of high risk and pursuing activities of high risk should be discouraged when possible for staff working closely with felids.
  - o Each facility has internal protocols for staff depending on risk, state/province, and facility needs. Testing can be implemented for staff after possible exposures and high-risk events as possible.

It is important to remember that non-domestic felids are susceptible to a wide range of other respiratory pathogens. However, if you have a suspect case, samples from zoo species can be tested at veterinary diagnostic laboratories. Suitable samples include nasal, oral, and oropharyngeal swabs; tracheal wash; bronchoalveolar lavage; and feces. It is imperative that you first contact your state animal health officials to discuss any suspect case/s and to obtain permission to send samples for testing. Additionally, SARS CoV-2 is an OIE reportable disease. As such, any sample that is presumptive positive at a veterinary diagnostic laboratory in the US will automatically be sent to the National Veterinary Services Laboratory (NVSL) for confirmatory testing. If confirmed, NVSL is required to report results to state and federal officials, and the latter are required to report positive results in newly identified species to the OIE. For US facilities, USDA-APHIS will work with the submitting zoo to issue a press release on any newly identified species (felid or other) infected with the virus.

Stay well and safe,

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