Dear Colleagues

Our knowledge of SARS-CoV-2 the virus that causes COVID-19 has been rapidly increasing but there is still a lot that we do not know. We would like to respond to some of the anecdotal reports and concerns that have been circulating on list serves/social media with respect to this disease in non-domestic cats. As you may have already seen, we have just received confirmation from NVSL of a natural infection in a symptomatic tiger in a zoo. To date, this is the only infection confirmed at approved testing laboratories (see below).

Recent unpublished research indicates that the virus can replicate in domestic cats, that some domestic cats develop respiratory disease, and that domestic cats may be able to infect other domestic cats. While this research has not been scrutinized during the peer-review process and this was an experimental trial in a laboratory setting, the results are worrisome. Given this information and the new information about a natural infection, the Felid TAG veterinary advisors feel that it would be prudent to presume that all non-domestic felids may be susceptible to this novel coronavirus and that SARS-CoV-2 poses a risk to non-domestic felids in human care.

There are still many unknowns. We know that people can carry and transmit the virus without even knowing that they are infected. It is considered most probable that SARS-CoV-2 infections that occur in non-domestic felids in zoo settings will be due to spread from humans. We do not know if cats (domestic or non-domestic) can also carry the virus without showing clinical signs. We do not yet know the disease course and spectrum of clinical signs in those cats that do get sick. We do not know if an infected non-domestic cat can transmit the virus to other cats in our care or to humans.

Given these unknowns, we feel that each facility should do a comprehensive risk assessment that includes:

- PPE management and disinfection protocols
  - including for potential fomites such as food bowls, enrichment
- Limiting staff access to felid holding
- Re-assessment of proximity to cats (implementing social distancing - 6’ minimum)
  - including during
    - Training
    - Shifting
    - Feeding
- Screening of staff with access to felids for symptoms
  - Pro-active evaluation of staffing needs should staff become sick so that safe working environments with sufficient trained staff on site can be maintained

PPE supplies and use should be critically evaluated as these are needed by those on the front lines in the human medical community.

It is also 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 screened at a number of approved veterinary diagnostic laboratories. Oral/nasal swabs,
tracheal wash or other respiratory samples, and fecal samples can be submitted. Felid TAG veterinary advisors can assist you in finding a laboratory. However, at present, per regulatory authorities, zoos first must contact their State Animal Health Officials to obtain permission to send samples and these officials may suggest a specific state lab. Additionally, SARS CoV-2 is an OIE reportable disease and there are penalties for those who do not report. As such, any positive sample will be automatically sent to NVSL (National Veterinary Services Laboratory) for confirmation. If confirmed, NVSL is required to report results to state and federal officials. Therefore, the decision to test needs to be made with caution and the understanding that results will be communicated to authorities. As the situation evolves and our understanding of disease in cats (both domestic and non-domestic) improves, we do not know if this will change. This is the testing and reporting protocol in place at the time of this writing (5 April 2020).

We realize that this is unsettling news coming at an unsettling time. We wish we did not have to add to your worries. Please reach out with questions and we will try to answer to the extent of our understanding of this disease. Stay well and safe,

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