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OPINION[TalkBack](#)**Animal rights group hounds Ringling Bros.****Peninsula organization claims circus abused elephant in Oakland**

By Laura Casey, STAFF WRITER

OAKLAND — A Redwood City animal rights group is prodding the U.S. Department of Agriculture to investigate claims that staff of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey abused an elephant while the circus toured in Oakland in August.

The USDA has not confirmed that the circus is being investigated for those incidents, which were caught on videotape. However, agency officials have asked the Oakland Tribune for copies of newspaper articles about accusations of elephant cruelty that may have occurred here in 2004.

Deniz Bolbol of Citizens for Cruelty-Free Entertainment said she recently gave the USDA a statement about her complaints of cruelty toward the circus's 7-year-old Asian elephant, Angelica.

The USDA is charged with enforcing the Animal Welfare Act.

Bolbol and others videotaped a handler striking his young charge in the legs with a bullhook, or ankus. The group also videotaped the circus's elephants displaying what Oakland Zoo elephant expert Colleen Kinzley called "abnormal behavior," swinging and swaying as they were shackled in chains for several hours a day.

"They are looking at a video that I captured in Oakland," she said. "We are all happy that they are investigating."

While the circus was still in the Bay Area the group distributed the video to several media outlets, prompting a swift response

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from circus officials.

A letter written by Deborah Fahrenbruck, animal behaviorist and veterinary technician for Ringling Bros., said Angelica was "both unharmed and unfazed by what appears to be misuses of the animal handler's guide."

She said the handler left the circus before the company could do anything about the incident. She added Ringling Bros. adheres to the American Zoo Association and Elephant Handlers Association's published guidelines.

USDA spokesman Larry Hawkins confirmed the agency has three open investigations into Ringling Bros.

Ringling Bros.' national public relations director, Darin Johnson, said one investigation involves the August 2004 euthanasia of an 8-month-old elephant that fell from a 19-inch-tall round platform. A second investigation is being conducted on the July 2004 death of Clyde, a 2-year-old lion that died while traveling by train to California.

Johnson said the USDA has not contacted Ringling Bros. about this new investigation.

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