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Company to send elephants to home with room to roam

By Michael Hartigan, USA TODAY

After months of government negotiations to resolve charges of animal mistreatment, nine elephants from Illinois will pack their trunks and move to Tennessee.



Lota's death prompted a movement that helped other pachyderms.

Humane Society of the United States

The Hawthorn Corp., a Richmond, Ill., company that rents elephants, lions and tigers to circuses, agreed last week to send the nine female elephants to the 2,700-acre Elephant Sanctuary in Hohenwald, Tenn., where they will live in a free-roaming environment.

"By giving the elephants lots and lots of room, you're giving them not only the opportunity to walk around but giving them the opportunity to remain healthy," says Carol Buckley, executive director of the sanctuary. The animals are to arrive this month.

In March 2004, after negotiations with the Department of Agriculture, Hawthorn admitted to 19 violations of the Animal Welfare Act, including inadequate veterinary care. Some of its elephants had died of tuberculosis. Hawthorn agreed to pay a \$200,000 fine and transfer its elephants to a USDA-approved location. The agreement last week settled where the animals would be sent.

The USDA has cited Hawthorn several times for violating the Animal Welfare Act. In 1996, when a Hawthorn elephant killed its trainer in Honolulu, the USDA cited the company for failure to handle the animal safely, according to USDA reports.

Derek Shaffer, an attorney for Hawthorn, says the agreements have resolved any allegations concerning the animals' mistreatment. He says Hawthorn spent considerable time and money finding an appropriate home for the animals.

This will be the third time the sanctuary has received elephants from Hawthorn. In 2003, it got a female named Delhi, which had a bone infection Buckley says is found

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only in captive elephants and often kills them. Two others, Lota and Misty, arrived in 2004.

It was Lota's death from tuberculosis in February 2005 that mobilized elephant lovers to the plight of the Hawthorn herd and captive elephants in general, says Amy Mayers, a sanctuary member.

Operators of the Elephant Sanctuary say they are pleased the herd will remain intact. "Some of them have been together for decades," Buckley says. "That's been our goal for two years, to get the elephants en masse."

The non-profit sanctuary, which was set up in 1995, has 11 elephants — eight Asian and three African. Buckley says the habitat has room for up to 100 elephants.

Last month, the sanctuary completed a \$3 million housing facility in anticipation of getting the elephants. Half the money for its construction was raised from 40,000 sanctuary members and half from the Harold Simmons Foundation in Texas.

After medical tests and quarantine, the nine elephants will have free run of the sanctuary's streams, forests and pond. To simulate the natural environment in the wild, the sanctuary will leave the elephants to feed and bathe on their own.

The public will be able to view them only via live video on the sanctuary's website.

Buckley says one goal in leaving the elephants undisturbed is to educate the public on how the animals act in the wild. Another is to help educate these elephants about life outside the Big Top: "They are expected to just relax, to recover and to finally discover what it means to be an elephant."

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