

Animal Rights Organization Files Lawsuit Against Utah Department of Transportation

Lawsuit claims that UDOT's policy requiring a \$1,000,000 liability insurance policy to protest fur farms in Morgan infringes on free speech rights

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A lawsuit was filed on October 21st in Federal District Court on behalf of the animal rights organization Salt Lake Animal Advocacy Movement (SLAAM) and two of its members, Colleen Hatfield and Jeremy Beckham. The lawsuit alleges that the Utah Department Of Transportation (UDOT) has infringed on SLAAM's right to peaceably assemble by requiring a \$1,000,000 liability insurance policy to protest on any state highway. UDOT has told SLAAM director Colleen Hatfield that she and other members of SLAAM will be arrested for trespassing if they do not acquire the policy prior to protesting on a state-maintained highway.

"Free speech is supposed to be free," said Colleen Hatfield. "When UDOT or any other government agency fixes a price tag on the right to assemble in a public forum, they inevitably exclude voices from the marketplace of ideas and deny people rights guaranteed them in the Constitution." SLAAM intends to protest outside fur farms and march on State Street in Morgan, Utah on November 28, 2009. State Street is the state maintained Utah Highway 66.

With fifteen operating fur farms, Morgan County has more fur farms than any other county in the U.S. Fur farms have long been the target of animal rights organizations due to their controversial animal husbandry practices and killing methods. Mink on fur farms are housed individually in cages not much larger than a shoebox. During pelting season, farmers must kill the animals without spoiling the coat. This means the animals are killed by anal electrocution or suffocation. SLAAM has established a website at FurFreeUtah.com outlining plans for the protest.

Last year, members of the underground organization Animal Liberation Front (ALF) released thousands of mink from a Kaysville fur farm and hundreds were released from a farm in South Jordan. Although many of the mink were recaptured, many mink that are descendants from the liberation have been spotted recently in Kaysville.

"SLAAM wants to shed light on the unspeakable and unnecessary animal suffering that is so commonplace on mink farms," said Jeremy Beckham, SLAAM member. "We will defend our rights to speak out on behalf of abused animals in Morgan even if that means we have to take the fight to the courtroom."

Contact:

**Colleen Hatfield
Jeremy Beckham**