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No Inspections for Zoo Restaurants Since 2006

Revelation follows outbreak that sickened 135 diners.



IMAGE: Parker Knight / CC

About two weeks ago, the [Oregon Zoo](#) acknowledged 135 people got sick after eating food prepared by at least one zoo restaurant. Health officials suspect the cause was a norovirus, which is passed from human feces.

WW has learned the zoo's restaurants have not undergone a county health inspection since 2006.

All other restaurants and food carts must undergo inspections twice a year. But state law governing restaurant inspections doesn't cover those run by government agencies. The loophole includes **Metro**, the regional government that runs the zoo and its restaurants.

County officials say they had regularly inspected zoo restaurants until 2006. That's the year the county, acting on legal advice, stopped inspecting them.

Metro spokesman Jim Middaugh says county inspectors were always welcome to examine the zoo's restaurants.

But Jon Kawaguchi, environmental health supervisor for Multnomah County, says the county repeatedly offered to inspect zoo restaurants but was turned down by Metro.

"We offered consultative inspections," Kawaguchi says. "They did not accept our offer to be inspected."

Middaugh says zoo restaurant employees do daily inspections, adding there's no evidence county inspections would have prevented the suspected norovirus outbreak. He acknowledges Metro has not hired an outside inspector to ensure restaurant employees are following state health rules.

"The zoo maintains and enforces safe food-handling practices," Middaugh says. "Zoo management will continue to reinforce and insist on those practices with all food-handling staff."

State health officials believe the 135 diners at the zoo were made sick by a norovirus, or Norwalk virus, which causes vomiting, diarrhea and stomach pain. They believe the food was contaminated between Dec. 5 and 7.

Oregon Public Health Division spokesman Jonathan Modie says people can get the very contagious norovirus from an infected person, contaminated food or water, or by touching contaminated surfaces.

Zoo officials say two restaurants, Cascade Grill and AfriCafe, and the zoo's food preparation areas were later sanitized. Modie says a subsequent investigation found no big problems. Kawaguchi says the zoo has since asked county inspectors to consult with its restaurants.