Policy on Social Housing of Research Animals (Terrestrial and Aquatic)

The Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals (NRC, 2011) states that, “Appropriate social interactions among members of the same species (conspecifics) are essential to normal development and well-being (Bayne et al. 1995; Hall 1998; Novak et al. 2006). When selecting a suitable social environment, attention should be given to whether the animals are naturally territorial or communal and whether they should be housed singly, in pairs, or in groups. An understanding of species-typical natural social behavior (e.g., natural social composition, population density, ability to disperse, familiarity, and social ranking) is key to successful social housing.”

Social housing of all social research animal species is the default housing environment at UNC-CH. Single housing of social species (other than short term recovery from experimental manipulation) must be justified based on experimental requirements and described in Section 6.0.5b of the protocol. The justification can be submitted for review and approval by the IACUC as part of a new or continuing ACAP application or via an amendment. Implementation of this process will be phased in over the next three years beginning July 2013.

All singly-housed USDA covered species must have a ‘Single Housing’ card on the cage to indicate the reason for non-social housing. It is the laboratory’s responsibility to ensure that these cards are placed and maintained to accurately reflect the current status of each animal. For animals without a permanent record, this card serves as a social housing record history for the life of the animal. If the animal has a permanent record, the reason for single housing must also be written in each animal’s permanent record. The cards and/or the records must be readily available for review by IACUC, DLAM and outside regulators upon request.

DLAM veterinary staff may also require individual housing of animals due to medical concerns. However, this will be indicated in the animals’ medical record and may not need to be described in the protocol. DLAM Veterinary Services and IACUC consider demonstrated incompatibility within social groups to be grounds for immediate separation for protection of animals.

When necessary, single housing of social animals should be limited to the minimum period necessary and, where possible, visual, auditory, olfactory and, depending on the species, protected tactile contact with compatible conspecifics should be provided. In the absence of other animals, additional enrichment should be offered, such as safe and positive interaction with the animal care staff, as appropriate to the species; periodic release into larger enclosures; supplemental enrichment items; and/or the addition of a companion animal in the room or housing area.

Social animals will be housed in stable pairs or groups of compatible individuals unless they must be housed alone for experimental reasons or because of social incompatibility.

Not all members of a social species are necessarily socially compatible. Social housing of incompatible animals can induce aggression, chronic stress, injury, and even death, therefore appropriate monitoring and intervention is necessary.

Risk of social incompatibility is greatly reduced if the animals to be grouped are raised together from a young age, if group composition remains stable, and if the design of the animals’ enclosure and their environmental enrichment facilitate the avoidance of social conflicts. Social stability should be carefully monitored; in cases of severe or prolonged aggression, incompatible individuals need to be separated.

Structural adjustments should be evaluated in for social housing. For example, perches, visual barriers, refuges and important resources such as food, water, and shelter should be provided in such a way that they cannot be monopolized by dominant animals.

Aquatics: Schooling fish species should be housed with conspecifics and many amphibians may be group housed.