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Posted on Fri, Jun. 29, 2007

NORTH CAROLINA

Pythons, boas dropped from proposed exotic animal ban

Supporters of a proposed exotic animal ban dropped pythons and boas from the bill after intense lobbying from reptile collectors across the state.

The revised bill would ban the private ownership of wolves, lions, tigers, bears, apes, monkeys and five other animals deemed "inherently dangerous."

Exemptions would include circuses, university research labs and zoos accredited by the American Zoo and Aquarium Association.

The central aims of the bill remain intact -- eliminating the threat of "backyard" tigers and preventing North Carolina from becoming a haven for exotic pet owners fleeing states that already ban or regulate such animals. .

Critics of the bill say it goes too far. "This bill needs to be gone," said Dora Turner, owner of Noah's Landing, a small, nonprofit zoo in Harnett County. "All we need to control is big cats and bears."

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<http://www.newsobserver.com/politics/story/620967.html>

Published: Jun 29, 2007 12:30 AM

Modified: Jun 29, 2007 04:22 AM

Backers tone down exotic animal ban

Lions and tigers and bears are still on the list

By Jim Nesbitt, Staff Writer

Supporters of a proposed exotic animal ban tried to counter stiff opposition from North Carolina agricultural interests by eliminating language farm lobbyists said could have allowed local governments to restrict the pork and poultry industry.

They also dropped pythons and boas from the bill after intense lobbying from reptile collectors across the state.

Unveiled during a state Senate hearing Thursday, the revised bill would ban the private ownership of wolves, lions, tigers, bears, apes, monkeys and five other types of animals deemed "inherently dangerous."

The proposed legislation would set tough requirements for "grandfathering" existing ownership of banned animals, such as a \$1 million liability insurance policy.

Exemptions to the ban would include circuses, university research labs, sanctuaries without breeding programs and zoos accredited by the American Zoo and Aquarium Association, a nonprofit standards organization whose members include the N.C. Zoological Park in Asheboro.

While making a pitch to the committee, the bill's sponsor, Sen. Ed Jones, gave a nod to the contentious atmosphere surrounding his legislation and a related study committee.

Jones noted the revised bill also dropped exotic cloven-hoofed animals such as the Cape buffalo because they're in the same animal family as domesticated cattle -- a further attempt to mollify opposition from the farm lobby.

"We're not here trying to get rid of cattle that people eat every day," said Jones, a Democrat from Halifax County.

But Jones said the central aims of the bill remain intact -- eliminating the public safety threat of "backyard" tigers and preventing North Carolina from becoming a haven for exotic pet owners fleeing states that already ban or regulate such animals. North Carolina is one of nine states that don't regulate the private ownership of exotic animals deemed a public safety or health risk, although 37 local governments have bans or regulations in place, including Cary, Chapel Hill and Durham and Orange counties.

"We didn't want North Carolina to become the dumping ground," Jones said. "These animals are dangerous, and nobody wants them living next door."

The public safety threat of exotic pets is highlighted by the 2003 death of a Wilkes County fourth-grader pounced on by a tiger kept at his aunt's home. The committee heard an impassioned plea for the bill from Rebecca Mastin, principal of a small Wilkes County elementary school. At the time C.J. Eller was killed by his aunt's tiger, Mastin was his fourth-grade teacher.

"Our children deserve to live in safe neighborhoods," she said. "One child lost is one too many."

While noting that such deaths are tragic, committee member Eddie Goodall said they seemed rare and wondered whether a statewide ban on exotic animals is justified.

"I haven't seen a public safety need demonstrated yet," said Goodall, a Republican from Union County.

Critics say the bill goes too far.

Owners of small, private zoos and sanctuaries say the bill would still put them out of business. They also say Jones and lobbyists for the Animal Protection Institute of Sacramento, Calif., an animal-rights organization pushing the legislation, have ignored

their proposals for alternative standards of care, housing and certification that they could more readily meet.

The committee did not vote on Jones' bill and will hold another hearing on it next week.

"This bill needs to be gone," said Dora Turner, owner of Noah's Landing, a small, nonprofit zoo in Harnett County. "All we need to control is big cats and bears."

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