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Lions rest after having been fed at Conservators' Center, Inc near Mebane in this file photo. They have many animals that they have rescued or that they are selectively breeding. Many private zoos oppose a proposed ban on keeping exotic animals as pets.  
JOHN ROTTET, THE NEWS AND OBSERVER

## Critics still wary of exotic animal rules

By Jim Nesbitt, Staff Writer

Supporters of a proposed statewide ban on inherently dangerous animals unveiled a major concession today to critics who say the bill would put small, privately-owned zoos out of business.

The new legislative language, revealed during a Senate hearing, would exempt any exhibitor holding the most stringent license offered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Aimed at quelling some of the bill's fiercest critics, the revision would allow zoos and other exhibitors holding a USDA license to keep banned animals — including lions, tigers, bears, wolves, elephants, monkeys and apes — and replace aging or ailing animals.

But the new provision would also require a \$2 million liability insurance policy small zoos say would be tough to meet. It would also only apply to exhibits at a fixed location that are open to the public at regular hours. It wouldn't apply to traveling animal education programs for schools and churches.

"I'm not a zoo — I'm an outreach program; I bring the animals to you," said Dan Breeding, an exotic animal trainer and wildlife educator who keeps an alligator, apes and

other exotic animals on a 25-acre compound near Wake Forest. “The way this bill is written, I’m out of a job, and that doesn’t sound very American.”

The concession also did little to quiet the opposition of state agriculture officials, who say a statewide ban is unnecessary. Nor did it please lobbyists for the pork and poultry industry, who say the bill opens the door for animal rights groups to restrict farm animals.

Agriculture industry officials say they’re suspicious of the bill’s chief backer, the Animal Protection Institute of Sacramento, Calif.

But state Sen. Ed Jones, the bill’s sponsor, scoffed at this concern, noting previous concessions removed the language farm lobbyists found objectionable.

“This is not about pork or poultry,” said Jones, a Democrat from Halifax County. “We’re talking about things that can kill you if they have a chance. I don’t know the last time a pig or chicken killed somebody.”

The public safety threat of exotic pets was highlighted by the 2003 death of a Wilkes County fourth-grader who was pounced on by a tiger kept at his aunt’s home. Jones said eliminating the threat of “backyard” tigers, lions and other large carnivores is the central purpose of his bill.

He also said the bill will prevent 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. Cary, Chapel Hill and Durham, Wake, Chatham and Orange counties all have such bans.

But critics say federal wildlife laws already prevent people keeping tigers, lions and other exotic animals as pets from bringing them to North Carolina. They agree the private ownership of “backyard” lions, tigers and bears should be outlawed, but don’t think the public safety threat from these animals justifies a statewide ban on monkeys, apes, bats and other exotic animals.

The revised bill would ban the private ownership of wolves, lions, tigers, bears, apes, monkeys, hippopotamus, elephants, bats, crocodiles, alligators and poisonous lizards deemed “inherently dangerous.”

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

Other 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.

State Sen. Fletcher Hartsell, Jr., chairman of the Senate committee considering Jones' bill, said the "majority of the committee" thinks the bill is too broad. He appointed a four-member subcommittee to work on the legislation and said he hopes to hold another hearing next week.

"It's a very, very, very emotional issue for a large segment of the population and that's what we're trying to winnow through," said Hartsell, a Republican from Concord.

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### **Exotic animal ban vote delayed**

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By: Tim Boyum

RALEIGH -- Proposals to ban exotic animals in North Carolina are creating controversy.

The state is just one of nine nationwide without regulation for private ownership. Tuesday a Senate committee took up the issue and heard an earful from small zoo owners. The intense controversy is forcing lawmakers to hold off on any decisions.

Wendy Wilson drove hours from Mooresville to the General Assembly Tuesday, but she feels it's vital to make sure her business remains open.

"You're dealing with people and their animals which they care about very much," the Lazy Five Ranch operator said. "You're dealing with their business which they have worked hard for."

A proposed ban would end private ownership of tigers, lions, monkeys and other animals labeled inherently dangerous. It stems from a 2003 Wilkes County incident where a fourth grader was killed by a tiger kept in his aunt's yard.



"This bill is about getting an animal out of the back yard; it is not about putting anyone out of business," said state Sen. Ed Jones (D-Halifax). "It's about holding people accountable for their actions out here."

Private zoo and sanctuary owners disagree. They believe the bill would limit exotic animals to nationally certified facilities. There's only one place in the state with that certification, the North Carolina Zoo. "It will grandfather in my creatures until January 1, 2008," Wild Animal Encounters Dan Breeding said. "When those creatures die, I'm done. I have to move back to California or

back to Florida where I used to live."The bill would also require a \$2 million insurance policy and restrict visitation for these animals.

"I think there would be difficulty in finding an insurance provider to write that type of policy," Wilson added.

"I think they're misinterpreting the language," added Sen. Jones. "The thing is not putting anyone out of business."The proposed ban has caused such a stir, the chair of the committee has set up a subcommittee to take on the issue first. Nearly 40 local governments do have some sort of ban or strict regulation already on the books.