

## Wild animal legislation bogged down by amendments

### Proposal floated after Stamford chimp attack

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Travis the chimpanzee at his North Stamford home. Legislation prohibiting the ownership of exotic pets has become bogged down with amendments and looks likely to fail. (File photo)

HARTFORD -- Responding to February's chimpanzee attack in Stamford, lawmakers, Attorney General Richard Blumenthal and the Department of Environmental Protection all called for a new law banning private ownership of dangerous wild animals in the state.

But the bill has proven more controversial than initially intended and become bogged down with a variety of amendments that threaten its passage before the legislative session ends June 3.

"I am concerned," state Sen. Edward Meyer, D-Guilford, a co-chairman of the legislature's Environmental Committee, said Wednesday. "Here we are with less than a week left and the bill has not come up to the Senate" from the House of Representatives.

As was previously reported, state Rep. Dick Roy, D-Milford, the House chairman of the Environment Committee, has for the past few weeks been fine-tuning the proposal to grandfather in two dozen small monkeys owned by various families, specify ferrets are domestic animals that can be kept as pets, and ensure the law does not mistakenly ban circuses from Connecticut.

But about a dozen amendments -- some related directly to the proposal, others only tangentially linked to the legislation -- have been attached to the legislation by various lawmakers.

"It's like a Christmas tree," said state Rep. Diana Urban, D-North Stonington.

Urban, a member of the Environmental Committee, is responsible for an amendment that would allow people who have animals deemed

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illegal by the legislation to keep them as long as they register the pet with the state DEP.

The bill lists several types of cats, bears, primates, snakes, scorpions, tarantulas and more. "Grandfather everybody and after that say, 'No more,' " Urban said.

Urban said she fears that the bill goes too far and, faced with having to get rid of the pets, many residents will hide them so they are not taken away.

"Who tells me a kid's not bonded with a tarantula?" said Urban, an advocate for animal rights in the legislature.

She said she fears others might release or kill the creatures.

But Meyer argued that is what led to the Stamford chimp mauling.

Travis, the 200-pound chimpanzee who was shot and killed by Stamford police after mauling 55-year-old Charla Nash, was grandfathered into a relatively weak 2004 state law requiring DEP permits for wild animals.

"Grandfathering doesn't really protect animals or people," Meyer said. "You can have another savage chimp attack."

But he also acknowledged Urban has raised a valid question about what lawmakers and the DEP want current owners to do with their pets if the proposed ban becomes law.

Meyer said the expectation is law-abiding owners would turn the animals over to zoos or trainers or circuses or other professional organizations that can legally own them.

"Maybe we've got to make it clear," he said. "We're not talking about 'neighborhood release' here."

DEP spokesman Denis Schain said the agency will establish "an orderly process" for owners to contact the DEP if they believe their pet violates the law and assist them in relocating or placing the animal.

Some Republican lawmakers proposed an amendment that would require Blumenthal's office to take custody of banned animals.

"They're making a cogent point," Urban said. "It's a tongue-and-cheek, 'What the hell are we supposed to do with these?' "

Unlike Urban's proposal, other amendments are not related directly to the intent of the bill but have to do with other issues involving animals.

A few deal with legalizing bow hunting on Sundays or the penalties for hunting while intoxicated.

Meyer attached an amendment to revive a proposal from earlier in the session banning leg-hold animal traps.

Like the wild animal ban, the leg hold trap bill was inspired by another recent tragedy.

In January, a great horned owl was found in Wallingford with a trap on its leg.

The leg was amputated and but the infection spread and the owl was eventually euthanized.

"People's pets get caught in these steel traps," Meyer said.

But he said Wednesday he will probably drop the amendment because it faces major opposition from the trapping industry and could further hamper passage of the wild animal ban.

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