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Legislature passes wild animal ban

Legislation in response to Stamford attack

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- 1
- 2
- 2



HARTFORD - The General Assembly Wednesday night unanimously passed a watered down ban on wild animals that only targets large primates.

"All they have done is really add three primates to the list of banned animals out of the many we had proposed," Dennis Schain, a spokesman for the Department of Environmental Protection, said in an interview following the vote.

The bill heads to Republican Gov. M. Jodi Rell for her signature.

Legislative proponents had declared the wild animal ban dead earlier this week because of a variety of issues that had arisen over the bill, proposed following February's chimpanzee attack in Stamford.

"Obviously we've experienced a tragedy in Stamford that no one should have to go through," Rep. Gerald Fox, D-Stamford, said following the unanimous vote in the House of Representatives. "If this legislation can help prevent anyone else from suffering it's a good piece of legislation."

The bill includes a provision to allow the state DEP to restrict the ownership of other exotic animals in the future as long as it holds public hearings on the issue.

A ban on wild and exotic animals was initially proposed after Travis, a chimpanzee that lived in Stamford for several years, severely mauled a family friend and was subsequently shot to death by police in February.

The state passed a law banning ownership of large cats, wolves and bears in 2004 and at the time instructed the DEP to establish a permitting program

for other wild or exotic pets, including primates. But that effort never really got off the ground.

And Travis, a local celebrity who lived in Stamford for years, was left alone by lawmakers and the DEP.

This session's ban as initially envisioned by the Department of Environmental Protection and Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, cast a wide net. It made it illegal to own a variety of animals from hippos to tarantulas that were not already included on the state's books.

But in recent weeks the legislation became what is known in the General Assembly as a "Christmas tree" loaded down with a variety of amendments.

Some lawmakers argued existing exotic pets owned by constituents should be grandfathered into the bill. They also argued the bill did not explain what those owners should do with the creatures if the ban were passed and they were not allowed to keep their pets.

Rep. Diana Urban, D-North Stonington, who pursued the grandfathering amendment, was concerned owners of pets suddenly deemed illegal would hide them, release them or potentially kill them.

The ban also attracted other controversial amendments addressing animal related concerns, including: Preventing Commerford Farm in Goshen, known for housing elephants, from bringing new pachyderms into the state; banning leg-hold animal traps; allowing bow hunting on Sundays.

"It got carried away," House Speaker Christopher Donovan, D-Meriden, said Wednesday.

The bill passed Wednesday night added gorillas, chimpanzee and orangutans to the 2004 list of prohibited animals in direct response to the Stamford incident.

The bill also emphasized if the DEP wants to expand the list, it needs to hold the regular hearings associated with changes in state regulations to give the public a voice.

"Many of us heard from constituents who had many sorts of animals that may or may not have been included," Rep. Clark Chapin, R-New Milford, a ranking Republican on the Environment Committee, told his colleagues before the vote. "Now DEP can take their time and do a more thoughtful vetting of those animals that should or shouldn't be included." Rep. Craig Miner, R-Litchfield, agreed.

Miner told the House two of his constituents have for years owned a pair of Burmese pythons "none of whom have hurt anyone." But he said if the ban as proposed had passed those snakes would have suddenly been outlawed.

Schain said the DEP was comfortable with the list it had suggested of banned animals.

"We were confident in the list we provided," Schain said. "We consulted outside experts and it was a very appropriate list." Rep. Richard Roy, D-Milford, the co-chairman of the environment committee who had been working all session on a bill, admitted it had been turned into a "vanilla" piece of legislation but said he was satisfied with the compromise.

"(After) the public outcry after the incident in Stamford with Travis we had to do something," Roy said. "This is a very good start." Fearful that the bill might not be voted out of the Senate in the final hours of the session, the House as an incentive attached a proposal favored by Sen. Andrew Roraback, R-Goshen, allowing a Christmas Village in his district to import reindeer for the holiday season.

Schain said the DEP was not happy about that decision and is concerned about imported reindeer passing disease along to the state's native deer population.

"It spreads quickly," Schain said. "We appreciate (the bill includes) safeguards for reindeer that are imported to be inspected and make sure they're healthy. But we're concerned any risk is too much."

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