

**Testimony of Sheriff Matt Lutz,
Muskingum County Sheriff's Office
Muskingum County, Ohio**

**Submitted to the House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife**

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Chairman Huffman, Ranking Member Bentz, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony concerning the Big Cat Public Safety Act (H.R. 263).

I am the Sheriff of Muskingum County, Ohio, and I have served in this role for 14 years, with a total of 33 years in law enforcement in addition to decades as a volunteer firefighter. Throughout those years, I have led my community's emergency response and public safety initiatives, overseeing and serving alongside a team of more than 100 fellow law enforcement officers to protect one of the largest counties in our state. I have firsthand experience with the dangers of captive big cats—the very dangers that H.R. 263 aims to address.

In late 2011, exotic animal collector Terry Thompson released more than 50 exotic animals, including 38 tigers, lions, and cougars that he had been keeping on his property in Zanesville. My department had no inventory of these animals at the time. When terrified neighbors began to see big cats, bears, and other non-native species running loose near their properties, they turned to the Sheriff's Department and it was up to me to determine what to do. In order to protect my community, I had to make the difficult decision to shoot the animals before they could harm or kill anyone. This decision, although the right one, brought major adversity to my department, my officers and my community.

This shocking incident placed a heavy burden on our deputies and the department as a whole, inflicting trauma among first responders, some of whom needed quite some time to cope with the experience. Some deputies had to look through a scope and take aim at iconic animals they had previously only seen and admired in a zoo or a documentary —animals they never expected to encounter in an emergency—and then pull the trigger. They were forced to think about the potential consequences of deadly animals getting farther into the community, including the extraordinary danger to the children playing soccer nearby, the families in adjacent homes, and the livestock and domestic animals in the area. They had to act swiftly and calmly under unimaginable circumstances. As noted, there was no choice but to put down most of the animals, and we were fortunate to be able to do so before people were harmed, but the experience caused immense stress for our team.

The wild animal release in Zanesville also imposed a significant fiscal cost on my department. As with the cost to human wellbeing, public safety agencies and communities are forced to absorb the expense of responding to dangerous incidents involving exotic felines. In the course of just two days, my department incurred thousands of dollars in overtime and related expenses while responding to this single incident. "Pet" big cat collectors are able to externalize the risks

created by irresponsible ownership, leaving taxpayers to bear the cost when big cats escape or otherwise jeopardize the public.

While this experience was extremely difficult for all involved, I want to stress that it could have been exponentially worse; it is miraculous that there was no loss of human life or serious injury that day. When the animals were released, a neighbor looked out a window and saw two exotic animals, including a big cat, in a nearby field, and she quickly notified the Sheriff's Department. She happened to know that Mr. Thompson kept exotic animals and that he did not have a containment fence in place, and we were able to respond quickly to her report. For the tiger that we did not contain until the following morning, animal care specialists noted that the stormy weather had likely caused the animal to remain in the area. The outcome could have been much worse if any single condition had been just slightly different, and it could be far worse next time. *Enacting H.R. 263 can help to ensure that there is no "next time."*

Indeed, if the Big Cat Public Safety Act had been in place, Mr. Thompson would not have been allowed to acquire and keep these deadly big cats in his backyard collection, and my department and my community would not have had to rely on "luck" to avoid loss of life. Even if his animals had qualified for the bill's "grandfather clause," he would have been prevented from continually acquiring new animals and, importantly, officials would have had an inventory of the species that were on his property.

In addition to cases in which the animals themselves cause emergencies, like escapes and attacks, the presence of such dangerous species can make it substantially more difficult to respond to other urgent situations. If first responders are called to address a crime, medical emergency, or fire, unexpectedly encountering a dangerous big cat puts the responders in harm's way and makes it more difficult to address the primary emergency.

My profession requires that I be prepared for unexpected and often dangerous circumstances. However, my colleagues and I should not be faced with the dangers of big cats kept in unqualified hands, nor should our communities. Law enforcement and other first responders do not go through training and typically do not have the equipment or facilities to manage escapes, attacks and other dangerous incidents involving tigers, lions, or other big cats—nor should we be expected to add this unnecessary risk, which could be eliminated through proper legislative action, to the list of dangers inherent in the role.

The Big Cat Public Safety Act represents a critical opportunity to protect first responders, as well as the public and the animals themselves. H.R. 263 will prohibit individuals from keeping tigers, lions, and other big cats as pets and limit dangerous direct contact between these wild animals and members of the public. The bill does not restrict ownership or breeding by zoos or other exhibitors licensed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA); rather, it aims to rein in the deadly trade in "pet" big cats and safeguard the public from having direct contact with apex predators. The bill would not result in the seizure of any big cats currently in private hands; those animals would be "grandfathered" and the owners would simply be barred from acquiring or breeding additional big cats.

After the exotic animal release in my community, the Ohio legislature took action to restrict private ownership within the state, but across the nation, exotic “pet” laws comprise a confusing patchwork. Big cat “pet” ownership must be regulated at the federal level because the captive big cat trade regularly crosses state lines. Trying to safeguard the public from unpredictable, wild felines exclusively through state and local action ignores the very nature of these dangerous species. Accordingly, a federal solution, in the form of H.R. 263, is essential to protect communities across the U.S.

We cannot stand on the sideline waiting for the next crisis. It is time to take a stand for first responders and bring an end to the irresponsible private ownership of big cats that continues to drive dangerous incidents across the U.S. Congress has the opportunity to do just that by enacting the Big Cat Public Safety Act. The National Sheriffs’ Association has endorsed the measure, as have countless individual first responders, animal care agencies, and rescuers across the U.S. I hope the Subcommittee will join them in supporting this long-overdue public safety measure.

I respectfully encourage the Subcommittee to advance H.R. 263. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this important matter.