

BIG CAT PUBLIC SAFETY ACT

July 2022

H.R. 263, the bipartisan Big Cat Public Safety Act (BCPSA), introduced by Rep. Mike Quigley (D-Ill.) on Jan. 11, 2021, amends the Captive Wildlife Safety Act to prohibit private possession and breeding of big cats and to restrict direct contact between the public and big cats. The bill has 258 cosponsors, including 52 Republicans, and is supported by the National Sheriffs' Association and the Humane Society.

PRIVATE OWNERSHIP OF BIG CATS IS A THREAT TO ANIMAL WELFARE & HUMAN SAFETY

Across the United States, there are as many as 20,000 privately-owned big cats. Overbreeding of big cats is largely driven by exhibitors who profit from providing photo-ops with baby cubs to the public. Once the cubs are a few weeks old and no longer profitable, they are often left to live in unsafe and abusive conditions (e.g., basements and backyards), sold into the exotic pet trade or black market for wildlife parts, or killed. In one case, more than 90 dead tigers, including 58 cubs stuffed into freezers, were found abandoned by the operator of a California cub-handling business.

Private ownership of big cats poses a serious risk to surrounding communities. Since 1990, there have been around 300 dangerous incidents involving big cats across 44 states. Four children lost their lives, and dozens more lost limbs or suffered traumatic injuries. Big cats have also killed 16 adults and mauled many others. When big cats are inadequately housed and poorly treated, it burdens law enforcement, drains the resources of sanctuaries, and jeopardizes conservation efforts.



IN 2011, 56 EXOTIC ANIMALS, INCLUDING 17 LIONS AND 18 TIGERS, ESCAPED FROM A PRIVATE HOME IN ZANESVILLE, OHIO. ALTHOUGH NO SERIOUS HUMAN INJURIES OCCURRED, 49 ANIMALS WERE SHOT AND KILLED TO PROTECT PUBLIC SAFETY.

HOW WILL THE BIG CAT PUBLIC SAFETY ACT PROTECT ANIMALS AND PEOPLE?

There are major loopholes in current federal protections for big cats. The Captive Wildlife Safety Act, passed in 2003, prohibits the import, export, transport, sale, purchase, or acquisition of big cats across states and the U.S. border. However, individuals or businesses with USDA "exhibitor" licenses (e.g., circuses, petting zoos and wildlife parks) are exempt from these prohibitions. There is also no federal policy regarding the possession or breeding of big cats for exhibition, leaving it up to the states, which are inconsistent.

THE BCPSA WILL FILL THESE POLICY GAPS BY DOING THE FOLLOWING:

- Prohibit the possession, breeding, import, export, transport, sale, purchase, or acquisition of lions, tigers, leopards, cheetahs, jaguars, cougars, or any hybrid of these species by individuals without a USDA license;
- Focus primarily on privately-owned animals, with exemptions for sanctuaries, universities, and zoos;
- Restrict direct contact between the public and big cats, with some exceptions for trained professionals, veterinarians, and conservation programs that do not involve commercial activities and meet other specified restrictions;
- Grandfather currently owned big cats, but require their owners to register animals so that first responders and animal control officers are aware of animals present in their communities.