

U.S. Reps. Steve Womack and French Hill Applauded for Backing Big Cat Public Safety Act to Keep Arkansans Safe

Legislation would protect citizens from dangerous big cats and help conservation of species in the wild

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/EINPresswire.com/ -- With the support of the national law enforcement, animal welfare, and conservation and mainstream zoological communities, the U.S. House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed the Big Cat Public Safety Act, H.R. 263, on Friday July 29 by a vote of 278 to 134. H.R. 263 was introduced by bipartisan Reps. Brian Fitzpatrick, R-Pa., Steve Womack a Republican who represents the Third

District of Arkansas, Mike Quigley, R-Ill., and others, and was actively supported on the floor by both Womack and Rep. French Hill, R-Little Rock, who [cosponsored](#) and [voted](#) for the bill as well.



Carole Baskin joins Rep. Steve Womack and staff on Capitol Hill on March 1, 2022

“

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Marty Irby, executive director at Animal Wellness Action

Despite tremendous support for the Big Cat Public Safety Act from [Turpentine Creek Wildlife Refuge in Eureka Springs](#), the National Sheriff's Association, and many others, Rep. Bruce Westerman, R-Hot Springs, the Ranking Member of the House Natural Resources Committee, led efforts to block the bill, denigrating the idea of even bringing the bill up for a vote but then suggesting that the Department of Agriculture should handle the problem. USDA is singularly ill-equipped to handle the trade in endangered lions and tigers.

"Breeders who pump out countless big cats for cub-petting are worse than puppy millers, placing unfunded mandates on animal rescues who have to clean up their mess and care for these majestic creatures once they've grown too big to exploit," said Marty Irby, executive director at Animal Wellness Action. "We applaud Reps. Steve Womack and French Hill for backing the Big Cat Public Safety Act that will help keep families and children in suburbia safe from dangerous big cats."

The bill builds on the Captive Wildlife Safety Act, passed unanimously in 2003, that sought to ban the trade in big cats as pets. That original measure had a drafting flaw, and the Big Cat Public Safety Act seeks to correct that problem and to ban breeding big cats for the pet trade or for commercial cub petting.

The bill had been introduced long before the salacious reality television series "Tiger King," but that series put the issue of private ownership of tigers and lions on the American radar screen. NBC's streaming platform, Peacock TV, also featured the bill in its series "Joe vs. Carole," released in March.

Law enforcement swung in force behind the bill.

"I've experienced the worst-case scenario first-hand, and it is a gut-wrenching experience to think about tigers, lions, and other big cats on the prowl in such close proximity to our homes and our schools," said Sheriff Matt Lutz from Zanesville, Ohio, whose office was forced to respond to a mass release of tigers, lions, and other animals in his community more than a decade ago.



Carole Baskin and Rep. Steve Womack on Capitol Hill on March 1, 2022



Rep. French Hill

“Chaos and cruelty result when people breed big cats for use as pets or for commercial petting operations,” said Wayne Pacelle, president of the Center for a Humane Economy. “It’s alarming that this problem has persisted for so long, and this is an important first step in establishing a national policy to stop the trade and breeding of endangered lions and tigers as pets in homes and props at roadside zoos.”

“It is an enormous expense to care for these animals, and this reckless behavior foists a massive long-term financial liability on animal sanctuaries,” said Carole Baskin, founder of Big Cat Rescue in Tampa, Florida. “None of these private big cat owners holds onto the animals for very long, and that means they get turned over to groups like Big Cat Rescue that have to take in these traumatized, often very unhealthy animals.”

Down from nearly 60 cub-petting operations just 10 or 15 years ago, there are now maybe two or three commercial cub petting outfits in the United States. Nearly all cub-petters featured in “Tiger King” are incarcerated, have had their animals seized, or are facing prosecution.

-Joe Exotic is serving 21 years in federal prison for 17 wildlife-related charges as well as murder for hire charges

-Jeff Lowe, who took charge of Joe Exotic’s GW Zoo and intended to open a cub-petting operation in far eastern Oklahoma, had his operation raided by federal authorities, who brought civil charges against him. Lowe’s animals have been confiscated and placed at sanctuaries.

-Tim Stark, another prominent Tiger King “star,” had his animals confiscated by the State of Indiana for multiple animal-related and nonprofit-operation violations. He fled the state after a criminal charge was filed and was arrested in New York.

-Bhagavan “Doc” Antle was arrested on charges of money laundering. He’s also facing charges by



Left to right: Carole Baskin, U.S. Rep. Dan Crenshaw, R-Texas, and Marty Irby

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the State of Virginia with 15 counts of wildlife trafficking and animal cruelty.

The tigers and lions bred for the pet trade or roadside attractions never lead good lives. They typically live in substandard conditions, and in almost every case, their lives end tragically. We reduce these remarkable beasts to shadows of themselves in dilapidated roadside menageries or in backyards or basements. The people who acquire the animals on impulse or for profit almost always give them up because they cannot be safely managed by individuals without sufficient resources or professional staff.

H.R. 263 is backed by the National Sheriffs' Association, state sheriffs' associations throughout the nation, the Fraternal Order of Police, the National Animal Care and Control Association, and countless other agencies and organizations. The Senate companion bill, S. 1210, has nearly 50 cosponsors.

Animal Wellness Action (Action) is a Washington, D.C.-based 501(c)(4) organization with a mission of helping animals by promoting legal standards forbidding cruelty. We champion causes that alleviate the suffering of companion animals, farm animals, and wildlife. We advocate for policies to stop dogfighting and cockfighting and other forms of malicious cruelty and to confront factory farming and other systemic forms of animal exploitation. To prevent cruelty, we promote enacting good public policies and we work to enforce those policies. To enact good laws, we must elect good lawmakers, and that's why we remind voters which candidates care about our issues and which ones don't. We believe helping animals helps us all.

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