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House panel sets size limits, conditions on reptile sales

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BATON ROUGE — Prompted by poor conditions found at a snake breeder's facility near Oakdale, a House committee Wednesday unanimously approved Rep. Dorothy Sue Hill's legislation setting restrictions on sales and housing of dangerous reptiles.

Hill, D-Dry Creek, said neighbors of the "High End Herps Inc." facility near Oakdale have been complaining about their pets disappearing, possibly being used as snake food, and expressing fears that snakes could escape.

"It's the pythons and poisonous snakes I'm definitely scared of," Hill said. "The sheriff's hands are tied and the D.A.'s hands are tied because we don't have a law."

An ad on its website offering constrictors longer than the 12-foot limit allowed by state law without a permit prompted the Allen Parish Sheriff's Department to investigate in March. It contacted the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries after finding 22 pythons longer than the 12 feet limit that triggers current state law requiring a permit for ownership.

David Beauchemin, 43, and Tawni Beauchemin, 23, operators of High End Herps, were arrested.

Allen Parish Chief Deputy Grant Willis said about 300 pythons and other reptiles were being kept in "plastic containers you could buy at Wal-Mart" and could have easily escaped.

Some snakes were in wood and wire screen boxes.

A list of reptiles retrieved from the facility features numerous poisonous snakes, including cobras and black mambas, which had been imported and bred at the facility.

"Black mamba?" questioned House Natural Resources Chairman Gordon Dove, R-Houma. "That's a very fast snake. If it bites you, it's over. If it should get in the wild, it's a very bad snake. I didn't realize individuals own them."

"Children are living in the area, so there's a safety issue," Willis said.

Rep. John Guinn, R-Jennings, said he was "appalled that Louisiana would even issue licenses house poisonous snakes. That takes a sick individual to even be involved in that. If this would outlaw that, I'd vote for it."

Joe and Joy Lewis, representing the United States Association of Reptile Keepers, argued against the bill but said they would support stricter fines or violating state law.

Joy Lewis said they rescued the snakes from High End Herps and put them in better facilities. "Not all of us are like David Beauchemin," she said.

Joe Lewis said he doubts Beauchemin would comply with the law if it is adopted because he has ignored laws in California and Arizona and "he's not going to follow this law."

HB1354 requires licensure for any person selling, trading, or propagating certain non-indigenous or poisonous snakes or constrictors. It requires that anyone marketing constrictors longer than six feet (amended from 12 feet) or poisonous snakes to register them and obtain licenses.

Owners of such snakes must receive permits.

There's an exception for animal sanctuaries, zoos,

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aquariums, wildlife research centers, scientific organizations, and medical research facilities listed in the federal Animal Welfare Act.

State law requires secure structures to house snakes at commercial facilities that handle constrictors and poisonous snakes.

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