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Lawmaker to revisit exotic animals bill

Proposed measure would increase regulations for keeping exotic animals.

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Two recent tiger attacks in Missouri could prompt stronger support for a bill tightening controls over dangerous exotic animals, the legislator who has led the effort for several years said Wednesday.

Rep. Michael Sutherland, R-Warrenton, said a bill he sponsored in the past and will sponsor again would regulate exotics as pets and provide more state oversight of facilities such as those in Warrenton and Branson West where people were injured by tigers on Sunday and Monday.

"They would have been able to operate, but they would have had to operate under some pretty strict guidelines under the state as far as identification of the animals, and definitely a lot more regulations on how the facilities were kept and the type of facilities the animals were kept in, so the public didn't have to worry about safety issues," he said.

He had hoped legislation toughening regulations on dangerous exotic animals would become law before anyone was injured or killed.

"Unfortunately, it looks like we've waited too long, and we'll have to be reactive," Sutherland said in the aftermath of Monday's attack on 16-year-old Dakota Wood-Ramel at the Branson Interactive Zoo and Aquarium and a tiger attack Sunday at the Wesa-A-Geh-Yah center in Warrenton.

Wood-Ramel remains in critical condition in Cox South Hospital, while Warrenton sanctuary volunteer Jacob Barr lost his leg below one knee.

Wesa-A-Geh-Yah's owner said Wednesday the facility has closed and the animals will be sent to other sanctuaries.

Closed Monday after Wood-Ramel was injured, the Branson West attraction re-opened Tuesday.

The only statewide regulation on dangerous exotic animals requires owners to register their animals with county sheriffs, Sutherland said, but he added sheriffs have more than enough to do to without having to check on the presence of big cats and other exotics.

Sutherland's bill would increase penalties for not registering an animal in a bill covering a Noah's Ark of animals, ranging from tigers and bears to other carnivores such as jaguars, mountain lions, ocelots, cheetahs, hyenas and wolves.

The bill also covers non-human primates and dangerous or poisonous reptiles.

The bill also calls for sheriffs to maintain a registry of animals to inform the public and for use during emergencies.

It would exempt travelling circuses, research facilities and educational institutions, research laboratories, veterinarians and zoos that are accredited with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums from having to register their animals.

The Branson West business is not an AZA member and has never applied for membership, an AZA spokesman said.

Owners of animals would not be allowed to take them onto public property and people who don't own the animals or work as keepers would not be allowed to handle them.

While other legislators offered bills tightening control of exotics in Missouri, Sutherland said he's been at the effort the longest, starting in 2003 after he was elected to the General Assembly.

Constituents at the first town hall meeting he held voiced concern about the Warrenton exotic animal facility, Sutherland said.

Although early efforts didn't make it past the hearing stage, a companion bill introduced by Sen. Tom Dempsey in the last session gave the bill more support, Sutherland said.

"Probably in light of the current situation, it will probably push from both sides, the House and the Senate, next year," he said. "I think there will be a lot more interest."

Few other state regulations apply to such facilities.

The Missouri Department of Conservation requires people in possession of wildlife native to Missouri to register with the department, but Conservation has no oversight of non-native exotics, department spokesman Jim Low said.

And other than a regulation requiring that animal carcasses be disposed of properly, the Missouri Department of Agriculture has no regulations on dangerous exotics, state Veterinarian Dr. Taylor Wood said.

Sutherland said only the U.S. Department of Agriculture has any oversight over exotic animals through its inspections of facilities that have the animals.

But the fact that the Warrenton refuge continued to operate after the USDA revoked its license is an indication the agency has little clout, Sutherland said.

The USDA is taking complaints about the Branson West facility seriously, agency spokeswoman Brie German said.

"At this time, we're looking into the incident," she said.

German would not confirm if USDA inspectors had visited the attraction. Commenting further would

compromise the agency's examination of the incident, she said.

On Tuesday, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals asked the USDA to investigate and consider revoking Branson Interactive Zoo and Aquarium's license.

PETA cited several incidents to take that action, including the injury of a zoo volunteer by a black panther in 2003 and the escape of three wolves in 2007.

The Humane Society of the United States wants Missouri to ban private ownership of tigers and other dangerous wild animals, but considers Sutherland's proposal encouraging, HUSA director of the exotic pets campaign Beth Preiss said.

"I would say legislation like that would be a step in the right direction," she said.

Missouri lawmakers need to act soon because several nearby states including Kansas have enacted bans, and Missouri could become a dumping ground for exotic animals, she said.

Rep. Dennis Wood, R-Kimberling City, said Missouri needs to control private ownership of dangerous exotic animals, but he would oppose regulations that would affect the Branson West animal attraction.

Wood said he would support a ban on keeping large cats and other dangerous exotic animals as private pets, but not legislation that would threaten the Branson West attraction.

Wood said he has been to the Branson Interactive Zoo and Aquarium and knows the people who run it.

"This zoo in my district is the only opportunity my local kids have for that kind of exposure," he said.

"I want to be real careful we provide every protection there can be without the elimination of this exposure for the kids and people who might not ever have an opportunity to see a wild animal."
