

Bipartisan legislation to prohibit the use of wild animals in traveling exhibits heard by Joint Committee on Tourism, Arts and Cultural Development

BOSTON (July 24, 2023) — Today the Massachusetts Joint Committee on Tourism, Arts and Cultural Development heard testimony on bills prohibiting the use of elephants, big cats, primates, giraffes and bears in traveling exhibits and shows (H.3245 and S.2197/S.2189). This critical, bipartisan legislation serves to protect wild animals from the distress inherent in their use as entertainment, including severe confinement, abusive training methods and the horrific burdens of transportation and exhibition.

The training methods addressed include the use of bullhooks, whips and electric prods. The urgency for these bills is amplified by the dozens of shows continuing to travel across the U.S. coupled with incidents that risk both public and worker safety.

Since 1990, nearly 160 dangerous incidents involving big cats, bears, elephants and primates used in traveling shows have occurred in the U.S. These incidents have led to 10 adult deaths, 136 adult injuries, and 73 injuries to children.

Exhibitors who travel to Massachusetts are no exception. In 2019, Beulah, an Asian elephant who had been used for more than four decades to give rides to circus and fairgoers in Massachusetts and other states, [died from blood poisoning](#) caused by a uterine infection that had plagued her for years. An exhibitor was cited by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for failing to safeguard the public after a teenager was bitten by a [capuchin monkey exhibited at the Brockton Fair](#). Another exhibitor who has provided elephants to numerous Massachusetts traveling shows, lost control of the multi-ton animals, including during an incident where [three elephants escaped](#) from an arena and rampaged through a packed parking lot while spectators watched.

A December 2022 poll of 624 registered Massachusetts voters commissioned by the MSPCA and conducted via online survey showed that two-thirds of Massachusetts voters support banning the use of wild animals in traveling acts. This legislation is not only an echo of public sentiment but also a step toward a future in which animals are treated with respect rather than exploited for entertainment.

This legislation is sponsored by Committee Chair Carole Fiola (D-Fall River), House Minority Leader Bradley Jones (R-North Reading), Senator Adam Gomez (D-Springfield) and Senate Minority Leader Bruce Tarr (R-Gloucester).

"During my tenure as the Chair of the committee last session, I was deeply moved by the compelling evidence and public sentiment against the use of wild animals in traveling acts," said Chair Fiola. "Now, as a sponsor of this legislation, I feel a strong obligation to ensure we bring about significant change. With over two-thirds of Massachusetts voters in favor of banning wild animal acts, it's clear our constituents desire a future free of animal exploitation for entertainment. This bill embodies that sentiment, underscoring our commitment to the humane treatment of animals."

Senator Gomez stressed the necessity for change, stating: "In 2019, we witnessed a tragic event in our district during the Big E Fair, when an elephant named Beulah, owned by R.W. Commerford & Sons, collapsed and died. She had been taken from her mother in the wild at a young age and spent her life in conditions that ultimately led to her premature death. Her story is a heartbreaking reminder of the urgency of this legislation. By passing these bills, Massachusetts would take a firm stand against such mistreatment and neglect."

Laura Hagen, director of captive wildlife for the Humane Society of the United States, who attended today's hearing, said: "Animals forced to be used in traveling shows are subjected to an array of physical and mental hardships that range from prolonged and cruel confinement in traveling containers where they can barely turn around, to outright abuse with archaic and cruel bullhooks, chains and whips. It is crucial for Massachusetts to join the other states that have already taken decisive action to reject this needless cruelty."

"Ringling Bros transitioned away from animal-centered acts, demonstrating that successful entertainment can be cruelty-free. We have an opportunity here to align with this forward-thinking approach," said Senate Minority Leader Tarr.

House Minority Leader Jones added: "There is a critical need for legislation like this, as federal laws currently do not provide adequate protection for these animals. States and municipalities must take the lead in ending the cruel and inhumane treatment of animals in circuses and traveling shows."

Animal Legal Defense Fund Senior Legislative Affairs Manager Stephanie Harris says: "Massachusetts has the opportunity to become the ninth state to protect wild animals from exploitation in circuses and traveling acts — building on the progress of the fourteen Massachusetts municipalities that have enacted local laws restricting the use of cruel animal acts within their borders."

Elizabeth Magner, animal advocacy specialist at the MSPCA, says: "Traveling exotic animal acts subject animals to immense suffering, as well as endanger public health and safety. There are hundreds of documented injuries to both handlers and patrons, including at outfits that frequent Massachusetts. Spectators are also put at risk of contracting zoonotic diseases. In 2017, for example, a woman was bitten by a monkey at the Brockton Fair and needed to undergo painful rabies treatment. Banning these traveling acts protects not just animals, but the Massachusetts public as well."

"In our rescue, rehabilitation, and sanctuary care work, FOUR PAWS has witnessed first-hand the physical and psychological trauma that wild animals like big cats and bears endure for entertainment," says Melanie Lary, research and campaigns officer for FOUR PAWS USA. "Stuck in inhospitable conditions, in extreme confinement, these wild animals are brutally forced to adapt to abnormal surroundings and perform unnatural behaviors. At the same time, FOUR PAWS has also seen the amazing recoveries they can make when they are given the opportunity to act as normal bears and big cats in a safe, species-appropriate environment."

"These are wild animals, each with unique needs for their specialized care and welfare, which simply cannot be met with traveling shows," said Cynthia Mead, Zoo New England executive vice president of external affairs and programming. "This legislation is needed to protect these animals."

Ally Blanck, director of advocacy for the Animal Rescue League of Boston, says, "Animals used in these acts are not adequately protected by current laws, and this legislation would ensure that Massachusetts continues to be a leader on animal protection."

Should this legislation become law, Massachusetts will join the eight other states that have already implemented various restrictions on the use of wild animals in traveling exhibits and shows. Massachusetts, in particular, already has a strong precedent for enacting such policies locally, with 14 of the 175 localities nationwide that ban wild animals in traveling acts located in the Commonwealth. Municipalities in Massachusetts with existing local bylaws and ordinances include Northampton, Amherst, Wilmington, Mendon, Braintree, Cambridge, Quincy, Pittsfield, Plymouth, Provincetown, Revere, Somerville, Topsfield and Weymouth.

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Founded in 1954, the Humane Society of the United States fights the big fights to end suffering for all animals. Together with millions of supporters, we take on puppy mills, factory farms, trophy hunts, animal testing and other cruel industries. With our affiliates, we rescue and care for tens of thousands of animals every year through our animal rescue team's work and other hands-on animal care services. We fight all forms of animal cruelty to achieve the vision behind our name: A humane society. Learn more about our work at humanesociety.org.

Since its founding in 1868, the MSPCA-Angell has worked to protect animals, relieve their suffering, and advance their health and welfare. The MSPCA comprises our Animal Care and Adoption Centers, our Advocacy Department, and our Law Enforcement Department; Angell Animal Medical Center is our nonprofit veterinary hospital. The MSPCA's legislative and public policy work is essential to bringing about long-term change for all animals. Working locally, on the state level, and nationally, we improve animal protection laws and regulations, foster the public's engagement with their elected officials, and provide resources to support humane coexistence with wildlife. Learn more at mspca.org.

The Animal Legal Defense Fund was founded in 1979 to protect the lives and advance the interests of animals through the legal system. To accomplish this mission, the Animal Legal Defense Fund files high-impact lawsuits to protect animals from harm; provides free legal assistance and training to prosecutors to assure that animal abusers are held accountable for their crimes; supports tough animal protection legislation and fights harmful legislation; and provides resources and opportunities to law students and professionals to advance the emerging field of animal law. For more information, please visit aldf.org.

FOUR PAWS is the global animal welfare organization for animals under direct human influence, which reveals suffering, rescues animals in need, and protects them. Founded in 1988 in Vienna by Heli Dugler and friends, the organization advocates for a world where humans treat animals with respect, empathy, and understanding. FOUR PAWS' sustainable campaigns and projects focus on companion animals including stray dogs and cats, farm animals, and wild animals – such as bears, big cats, and orangutans – kept in inappropriate conditions as well as in disaster and conflict zones. With offices in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Kosovo, the Netherlands, Switzerland, South Africa, Thailand, Ukraine, the UK, the USA and Vietnam, as well as sanctuaries for rescued animals in eleven countries, FOUR PAWS provides rapid help and long-term solutions. www.fourpawsusa.org