

Law Limits Surge in Big Cat Ownership

Internet and interstate sales to be quelled by new regulations.

Exotic cats such as lions and tigers cannot be bought, sold or transported across state lines according to new rules drafted recently by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The rules were necessary to implement the Captive Wildlife Safety Act, a law signed by President George Bush in 2003 that aims to stop Internet sales of big cats, and to limit a boom in ownership.

The law would go into effect in about six months, and gives us a tool at the federal level for addressing public safety concerns about the growing number of big cats in private hands in this country, said Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dale Hall.

An estimated 10,000 to 15,000 exotic cats are kept as pets in the United States, according to the Humane Society of the United States. Federal law does not say anything about ownership, but 19 states ban private possession of big cats, while another 16 have a partial ban or require a permit.

Wild animals don't belong in our backyards and basements, said Richard Farantino, a captive wildlife expert with the Humane Society. These are time-bombs waiting to explode in our communities.

The law allows exceptions for circuses, zoos, veterinarians, researchers, colleges and certain wildlife sanctuaries.

The regulations would apply to lions, tigers, leopards, cheetahs, jaguars, cougars and hybrids.

Posted: Feb. 7, 2006, 3 p.m. PST