

Legislation Seeks Big Cat Controls

The bill, Haley's Act, would prohibit physical contact between people and animals at sanctuaries.

Posted: April 24, 2007, 5 a.m. EST

Federal legislation recently introduced in Congress would protect the public from lion, tiger and other big cat attacks at facilities licensed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

H.R. 1947, also known as Haley's Act, was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives April 19. The bill is named in memory of Haley Hilderbrand, a 17-year-old high school senior in Kansas who was killed by a 550-pound Siberian tiger at a licensed big cat facility.

In 2006, after Haley's death, the Kansas state legislature banned the private ownership of big cats as pets and forbade public contact with big cats at USDA facilities to help prevent future tragedies.

Haley's Act would amend the Animal Welfare Act (AWA) to prohibit direct contact between the general public and big cats, including lions, tigers, leopards, cheetahs, jaguars, cougars and hybrids.

The bill would not ban the public display of big cats in zoos or housing big cats in sanctuaries, but seeks to strengthen safety for the public. It would also significantly increase fines for welfare act violations.

"Haley's Act [would] spare families from the horrible anguish caused by such attacks, while also ensuring the humane treatment of these remarkable animals who are forced to live in captivity," said U.S. Deputy Director of the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) Monica Medina.

Haley Hilderbrand's parents, Ronda and Mike Good, have said they support the legislation. They said that if a law to prevent direct contact between big cats and the public were in place already, Haley might still be alive.

There are currently more than 10,000 big cats, such as tigers and lions, held captive in the United States. In recent years, according to the IFAW, captive big cats have injured or killed more than 60 people.

"Lions and tigers are wild animals, not pets, and USDA-licensed facilities should treat these creatures accordingly. Congress must establish strict guidelines to prevent further tragedies from occurring," said Congresswoman Nancy Boyda (D-Kan.), who is cosponsoring the legislation with 12 other lawmakers.