

Cougar Ridge Educational Center, Inc.



From Rehabilitation to Education

May 5th,

2007

RE: Veto Request: CS/SB 2766

Dear Governor Crist,

Background: When CS/SB 2766 reaches your desk I implore you to veto this bill which was passed in the most deceptive manner I have seen in 30 years of lobbying. The Captive Wildlife Technical Advisory Group (CWTAG) was appointed by FWC to review every rule regarding captive wildlife carefully taking 2 years to do so. At our second meeting Rep. Poppell came to us and asked us to draft a bill to deal with the terrible problem of people releasing giant pythons in the Everglades. We were happy to help. After he found a Senate Sponsor, Sen. Posey, it was agreed by all that this would never be a vehicle for other species. In its second year the same agreement was made.

Being the only lobbyist on CWTAG and with the same concerns of the stakeholders around the state I “babysat” the bill to try to get it to pass without someone amending it. I fielded calls and emails in my home from all over the state promising people this would be **ONLY REPTILES** as I was constantly told. I believe more people contacted me than the Sponsors. Again I felt I was helping to keep their phone lines and emails somewhat cleared.

2007 Events: The bill moved in its proper shape until it showed up in the House Environmental & Natural Resources Council and suddenly there was a whole new section on Class I Mammals. Every Class I licensee would have to obtain a \$10,000 bond. Rep. Bob Allen asked “what has occurred to require this change?” The answer is nothing. I had done much research and discovered no one would sell these. Colonel Jones then testified that she knew a man who would sell one for \$300-\$400. I got his name and number (he is the man who has always sold the venomous reptile owners a \$1,000 bond). When I talked to him he was shocked. “She never said anything about 'lions tigers and bears', I thought we were still talking reptiles only. I will not do the other.

Additionally the \$1,000 bond has never been used. It was too late for me to give the Committee this information.

On Easter break when the Senate was home and the House was here I ran to Senator Posey's Aide Russ Cyphers. He said "Gloria I've told you for 2 years this is a REPTILE ONLY bill. I begged him to come to the House Committee. No one in Senator Posey's office had been asked or notified of this. I had lobbied it for free for 2 years and did not take a summer job to serve on CWTAG. I was devastated. We were all made liars.

When the bill was printed for its first Senate hearing the House Bill was copied with the Class I Mammal language. My testimony was for the bill but I stated I was very uncomfortable with Colonel Jones suggestion we add "unless the bond is generally unavailable" A savvy Senator spoke up and said "Wait a minute, isn't this supposed to be a Reptile only bill. Russ, please join Gloria at the podium." When questioned he had to tell the truth – that Senator Posey did not want this provision and in fact was not even told about it. Senator Dockery TP'd the bill to draft amendments to take all reference to Class I mammal licensees out. This amendment passed unanimously. However at its next stop in Gov. Op. Approp. It was put back in but with more terrifying language that we could choose to buy a \$2 million dollar insurance policy (only one man in the country sells them, so his price gouging is notorious – ie. One friend canceled his 3 years ago because it cost \$30,000 per year!)

Rep. Matt Meadows helped me with amendments to remove the Class I language. Bill drafting helped me change from HB to SB because it was in messages and would be taken up. I was assured they would be on the desk. They were no where to be found. The SB rolled to third with no one even realizing this had gone beyond reptiles. Rep. Meadows and I managed to get the 2/3 vote to amend on 3rd reading. We used his talk sheet to get the truth to members about all the deception that had occurred. A wonderful debate occurred and my amendments failed by 1 vote. If they had been heard on 2nd they probably would have passed. To lose because a clerical error prevented the opposing side to speak is heart wrenching.

We had long since discovered that this was done for Sen. J.D. Alexander who had never participated in any of our work. It was done for one friend of his who has cattle and his new neighbor with big cats scares him. Two feuding neighbors would change the lives of hundreds of people. Being as wealthy as he is, when I told him no one would sell the bond, he laughed and said then just go take \$10,000 out of the bank!

INTERESTING FACT: I learned during my research that the animal who has killed the most Americans is cattle. Much of it due to escaping (his very fear) and getting in roadways and causing almost always fatal accidents.

Rep. Meadows and I had tried to offer a grandfather clause when we thought the House bill was going to be taken up but were not given the chance. This means they will take my animals from me and likely euthanize them because I am not as wealthy as Sen. Alexander and because there just aren't enough people to take in the huge number or animals this will be..

Please be assured, the original Python bill is a good bill and I was an advocate for it, but our pact was broken in an underhanded way. Be assured a veto would not throw out the baby with the bathwater. I confirmed with FWC legal Friday that they have the rule making power to start regulating Pythons on their own. This was mostly a courtesy to Rep. Poppell to take home to his district (and ironically now has Posey's name on it).

There has never been a big cat escape its own property and gone on to another. Additionally

they have been fed already killed meat and don't know how to hunt and of course most are declawed. Please feel free to call me for any questions you may have and since I am in Havana I would be happy to show you all the safety measures we must take and tell you about the one year and one thousand hours of documented training that is required before you are even interviewed.

I have received a community service award for teaching local schools, senior centers, girl and boy scouts about why and how animals become extinct and they learn how to respect wildlife. I consider it a God-given mission and my animals are treated like children. Let myself and others avoid a "hidden ban" by using monetary ways to push us out of our lifestyles.

Please continue to lead as an example to the Legislature the honest and statesmanly way to operate.

Most Sincerely,

Gloria N. Johnson, Founder

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www.cougar-ridge.org