

Business

Snakes Get Lobbyists as Breeders Charm Congress on Boa Ban

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Andrew Wyatt says he could have picked an easier job than defending slithering creatures that squeeze their food to death and then swallow it whole.

“If you go and talk snakes to guys from Congress, their eyes cross over,” Wyatt, 47, said in an interview. “They don’t want to hear a word you say.”

Wyatt, president of the U.S. Association of Reptile Keepers, is lobbying in Washington to preserve the right to import boa constrictors and eight varieties of pythons and anacondas and to transport them across state lines, Bloomberg Government reported.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service wants to designate the snakes ecologically disruptive “injurious species,” a label that would prohibit interstate transactions. Burmese pythons have infested southern Florida, reproducing quickly and blending into their surroundings.

In a town where every cause and business concern pays for representatives to influence government -- there’s an indoor-tanning association and even a lobby

for lobbyists -- the snake group stands out because it must champion a species that gets star billing in horror films.

Wyatt's group, based in Grandy, North Carolina, casts the proposed designation as an example of governmental overreach, a common refrain in Washington. The reptile-keeper's association emphasizes the potential economic harm much as power companies are fighting clean-air regulations with warnings of high costs and unemployment.

The snake rule, now under review by the White House's Office of Management and Budget, would hurt a "nontraditional form of agriculture," Wyatt said.

Hiring Lobbyists

Wyatt, a former snake breeder, said he is paid \$80,000 a year by the reptile breeders' association. The group also hired New York-based Kelley Drye & Warren LLP in April to help make its case to Congress and the Obama administration. The law firm registered as lobbyists on the snake issue and was paid \$10,000 in the second quarter, according to Senate records.

The proposed rule targets the nine largest and most frequently traded snakes that wrap around their prey and kill by tightening their grip. They are native to Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and parts of South America and sub-Saharan Africa, although most sold in the U.S. are bred domestically.

Importers declared about 1.8 million of the constrictor snakes from 1999 to 2008, according to the Fish & Wildlife Service. About 832,000 live reptiles of all varieties with a value of \$4.2 million were brought into the U.S. last year, according to the U.S. International Trade Commission.

Asian Carp, Nutrias

The Interior Department said it will spend about \$100 million this year to combat invasive species such as the pythons in Florida, Asian carp and nutrias. A python's American diet can include wrens, deer and even alligators.

The snake species considered for the federal listing could survive in about one-third of U.S. states and territories, the U.S. Geological Survey said in a report by scientists at its Fort Collins Science Center in Colorado.

Climate change may extend their habitat as far north as New York and Washington state by 2100, according to the study.

The threat of Burmese pythons slinking toward Manhattan is overblown, according to a 2008 study by scientists at the City University of New York. They said weather patterns will confine them to the Everglades and far-southern Texas.

Listing the snakes as injurious may cost the reptile industry as much as \$104 million in domestic sales each year, or \$1.2 billion over the next decade, driving some breeders out of business, Kelley Drye & Warren said in a report for its clients.

The Fish and Wildlife Service found the industry would lose \$3.6 million to \$10.7 million a year and about 200 jobs may disappear.

Small Businesses

The U.S. Small Business Administration's Office of Advocacy, which reviews U.S. regulatory proposals, said in a May 10, 2010, letter to Interior Secretary Ken Salazar that the federal calculations didn't fully examine the "significant

economic impact on a substantial number” of small businesses.

More than 1 million Americans own the snakes the Fish and Wildlife Service wants to restrict, according to Wyatt.

Bob Clark, who says his breeding business in Oklahoma City has revenue of \$1 million a year and employs five people, said he recently sold two white reticulated pythons with piebald markings for \$25,000 each.

“It doesn’t happen every day,” he said in an interview. “But if it doesn’t happen at all, I’m going to miss it because that’s how I make my living.”

The customer was a breeder in Poland. Clark said his export business would suffer under the rule because he wouldn’t be able to deliver snakes to a port.

‘Silent Hunters’

Preventing the snakes’ spread is worth the potential cost, Valerie Fellows, a spokeswoman for the fish and wildlife service, said in an interview. “There is no 100 percent eradication method” once species start reproducing, she said.

Snakes recommended for the injurious-species list can grow to more than 25 feet (7.6 meters). The constrictors are “silent hunters that lie in wait” to ambush their targets, the fish and wildlife agency said.

The South Florida Water Management District petitioned the U.S. in 2006 to list the Burmese python as a danger after thousands appeared in the Everglades. Boas are also established south of Miami, according to the Geological Survey’s website.

The python population is an “ecological calamity in progress,” and a threat to

already imperiled species such as the Key Largo woodrat, known for building stick houses, and the wood stork, a long-legged wading bird that nests in cypresses and mangroves, the National Environmental Coalition on Invasive Species wrote in a May 2010 letter supporting the rule. Among six groups in the coalition are Defenders of Wildlife and the National Wildlife Federation.

Florida's Ban

Florida banned the in-state sale of seven types of constrictors as pets last year. Snake owners could keep their animals as long as they implanted identifier microchips and paid \$100 annually for a permit.

A group of congressional Republicans have embraced the snake-breeders' argument that a ban would damage merchants more than it would help the environment.

In a July 19 letter to the White House, Senator Lisa Murkowski and Representative Don Young, both from Alaska, and Senator Orrin Hatch and Representative Rob Bishop, both of Utah, urged Cass Sunstein, the administrator of the regulatory affairs office, to reject the rule.

The proposal "eliminates a whole category of small business," the lawmakers wrote. They called it "a generalized solution to a localized problem."

"We haven't made them reptile lovers or anything," Wyatt said of the lawmakers. "The question is, 'Are you going to let bad regulation kill jobs?'"

(Adds other lobbying groups in fifth paragraph.)

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