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Potential snake gassing ban killed by Texas Parks and Wildlife

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A proposed state ban on the gassing of rattlesnakes is dead after officials with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission removed the proposal from its November meeting agenda.

The state agency has several times tabled a decision on the practice, in which gasoline is pumped or sprayed into caves and crevices to drive snakes from their winter dens for capture. The seized snakes are then featured in rattlesnake roundups, old-fashioned carnivals in which snakes might be put on display, “milked” for venom or used in daredevil stunts.

Pushback from key lawmakers and communities that hold the roundups doomed the ban.

The commission “has decided that, at this time, there is insufficient support from legislative oversight or the potentially regulated community for the department to move forward with regulating the use of gasoline to collect rattlesnakes,” John Davis, wildlife diversity program director at the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, said in an email. “TPWD staff still believe that there are better options for collecting snakes that do not adversely impact non-target species, and we will continue to work with the snake collect-

ing community to develop and implement best practices that reduce potential impacts to these species.”

As long ago as 2012, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed petrochemical exposure as a threat to some of the tiny animals – spiders and the like – that live in limestone crevices.

A 2013 petition supported by biologists, zoologists, herpetologists and ecologists from Texas and other parts of the country triggered a closer look at the issue by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, eventually leading to the ban proposal. But after hearings and thousands of public comments, as well as pushback from rural lawmakers and then-Gov. Rick Perry, the governor-appointed Parks and Wildlife commissioners backed off the proposed ban, tabling it in May 2014 and calling for the creation of a working group.

The working group, the commissioners were told in January, failed to come to a consensus on the issue.

The decision to drop the issue from the November agenda was made by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department executive director Carter Smith, said Steve Lightfoot, an agency spokesman.

He said Smith would not be commenting on the decision.

“This outdated and indefensible practice risks contaminating our groundwater and killing endangered wildlife,” said Collette Adkins, a biologist and senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity, a nonprofit that submitted a legal petition asking Texas Parks and Wildlife to end wildlife gassing. “I’m deeply disappointed that the Commission once again caved to pressure from rattlesnake hunters.”