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Proposed turtle trapping restrictions delayed

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A set of rules that would restrict commercial turtle trapping in Iowa has stalled in the governor's office, delaying implementation of a law that passed with almost unanimous support in the state Legislature earlier this year.

A spokesman for the governor said the process has been delayed out of a desire to make sure all stakeholders have their voices heard. But some environmental activists blame it on politics, arguing the governor's office is intentionally dragging its feet in an effort to forestall enforcement of the law.

"The argument of not enough inclusiveness, opportunity to speak, time — I don't really believe that that's valid anymore," said Molly Hanson, executive director of Iowa Rivers Revival, which has supported limits on commercial turtle trapping. "I believe the process has gone through extensive comment periods and opportunities for people on all sides to be able to weigh in on the situation."



Photo: Zach Boyden-Holmes/The Register

The issue has been under debate since 2009 when environmental groups like the Center for Biological Diversity began pushing for a complete shutdown of commercial turtle trapping.

Iowa is one of only a handful of states that allow commercial trappers to catch unlimited numbers of certain turtles. This year, about 50 Iowans are licensed to do so, and they rely on the income they earn from trapping and selling turtles to help support themselves and their families.

Biologists, though, say Iowa's relatively lax restrictions have resulted in some alarming trends in long-term harvest data, and they worry about the sustainability of the state's turtle population.

During the last legislative session, Iowa lawmakers approved a bill requiring the state's Department of Natural Resources to set a season and daily catch limit for commercial turtle trapping. Gov. Terry Branstad signed it into



law in March, giving the department until September 19 to propose the season and catch limits.

The debate over how those limits would be set has been intensely controversial, with trappers arguing anything too strict could put them out of business. Environmentalists like Hanson worry they won't go far enough to protect turtles.

DNR initially proposed banning commercial trapping during the turtles' six-month nesting season and limiting the number of turtles trappers could take each day to 14 snapping turtles, one softshell turtle and three painted turtles.

"Turtle populations appear to be in trouble," said Chad Dolan, a fisheries biologist with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, noting the change could be related to a variety of issues, including changing habitats as well as commercial trapping. Zachary Boyden-Holmes/The Register

But Ben Hammes, a spokesman for the governor, said his office heard from turtle trappers and others who didn't feel they were adequately represented in the process.

Hammes said his office requested DNR hold another stakeholder meeting and send a revised proposal that also included a jobs impact statement. His office is now reviewing the revised proposal, he said, but the desire to hear from more stakeholders delayed moving the rules forward.

"We're just trying to find the best solution to protect turtles but also to protect the trappers that rely on this industry here in the state," he said. "So it's a desire to find a common sense solution for both turtles and trappers."

DNR was supposed to send its proposal to a legislative committee for final clearance by Sept. 19. It is now more than a week overdue.

"We want to make sure everybody's heard," said DNR deputy director Bruce Trautman. "Certainly there was a deadline there. But gathering the information and comments from folks is equally important."

In 2016, Governor Branstad signed into law a requirement that the Department of Natural Resources set a season and daily catch limit for commercial turtle trapping. Zachary Boyden-Holmes/The Register



DNR representative Martin Konrad said that if there are no more delays, the law could be implemented Feb. 8.

That would mean turtles could be harvested for more than a month during their coming nesting season, which generally runs from January through June – something environmentalists were hoping to avoid.

Hanson said she worries that legislators and activists will assume the law has been approved and turtles will be protected, when there is still a battle being fought over how to enact the law that was passed.

“We don’t want this to get lost. We don’t want it to disappear,” Hanson said. “People were passionate about it, they fought for it, and (legislators) voted for it.”