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Snake lovers protest as passions flare but Florida bans 'high-risk' reptiles

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Florida Today

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The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Thursday voted unanimously for a set of rules that would ban owning or breeding six types of pythons, the green anaconda and nine other "high-risk" reptiles.

The upshot of the ruling means that your pet tegu can live out the rest of its lizard days in Florida, but don't expect to buy a new one after that. Same goes for the other "high-risk" reptiles that biologists see as ecological terrorists, but enthusiasts love as scaly family members.

The new rules would, eliminate commercial breeding and pet ownership of 16 high-risk reptiles; put the high-risk reptiles on the state's prohibited species list, and limiting possession to permitted facilities engaged in educational exhibition, research or eradication or control activities.

The 16 reptiles include Burmese pythons; reticulated pythons; scrub pythons; Northern African pythons; Southern African Pythons; amethystine pythons; green anacondas; Nile monitor lizards; tegus (all species) and green iguanas.

FWC received more than 1,400 written comments and 5,500 surveys about the proposed rule, and held 10 workshops with more than 200 participants in the run up to

Thursday's rule-making meeting. But that didn't stop the meeting from being a hotbed of angry and passionate speakers from both sides of the issue. Emotions sometimes boiled over as more than 170 people called in to comment, many asking to stop the ban or at least reconsider it.

"Please look into it more," Katherine Gomez, a reptile owner from Homestead, pleaded. She wanted more research to prove the ban is needed and says the negative impacts would spread well beyond Florida, to those who breed, buy and own reptiles. "Please think about everyone's lives. It's not just Florida."

Biologists say the ban is needed to flatten the reptile "invasion curve." They say evidence shows that the reptiles wreak ecological havoc, they say, by swallowing native birds, and in the Burmese python's case, mammals as large as deer.

But serpent lovers say the move is nothing short of a state-orchestrated snake-pocalypse, that they claim unfairly targets their pets and businesses.

Opponents of the ruling challenged the science used to justify the ban. Some pointed to free-roaming cats as preying on many more native species than the exotic reptiles. Others said the rules would punish all responsible reptile owners due to a few irresponsible ones.

"Shouldn't you be looking at rules that punish outlaws?" asked Anthony Green, who runs Anthony's Exotic Rescues in Tampa. "You're creating a rule that makes criminals out of law-abiding citizens."

Many speak out against reptile ban

Most of the speakers who called in Thursday were pet industry and reptile rescue representatives opposing the ban, and several conservation groups commented in support of the ban.

"It uses sort of a broad-stroke approach to 16 different species," Pete Bandre, owner Incredible Pets in Melbourne, told commissioners.

Many of the banned species can't survive in the wild much north of Lake Okeechobee, Bandre added, "and yet you're prohibition covers the entire state."

Bandre also said the ban should not include "color-morph" reptiles, which sell for thousands of dollars and have even more trouble surviving in the wild.

"Their value is so high nobody's going to release them," he said.

David Stone, a reptile enthusiast from Pennsylvania, fears the ban would create an illegal, unregulated market for reptiles.

"The fact that I'm calling speaks to the gravity of this issue," Stone told commissioners. Other reptile enthusiasts against the ban called from as far as Oregon and New Jersey.

Representatives from conservation groups including Audubon, the Sierra Club and the Humane Society spoke out in support of the ban.

Elise Bennett, a staff attorney for the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity, said the new reptile rules are firmly grounded in science, thoroughly vetted, and tackle the invasive species problem at its source.

"It's just common sense that you can't succeed in bailing out your canoe without first plugging your hole," Bennett said.

Pet industry interests opposed the rule as too harsh on their businesses. They say it punishes responsible pet owners due to a few irresponsible ones, and could create underground markets for the banned reptiles.

Marcus Cantos, a reptile industry representative in Florida, said his industry's voices are not being heard regarding the economic impacts to their businesses.

"Far too many of us can't get through," Cantos said. "We are not having our day in court with this."

But commissioners said they held workshops and multiple other meetings to hear stakeholders' voices, so the public had plenty of opportunity to weigh in, and the Commission made some changes to the rules as a result.

"When you change someone's ability to make their livelihood, it's a really tough decision," Commission Chairman Rodney Barreto said just before the vote. "I don't think we can put a cost on the ramification that's being done on the environment by the reptiles. Let's take a bold stand. We've got to put our foot down."

Commissioner Steven Hudson said just before he voted for the ban: "As a fan of free enterprise, this is a tough one for me."

The commission amended the rule to double the time — to 180 days — for reptile breeders to comply with new outdoor enclosure requirements.

Managing the threat is anything but cheap

FWC says Burmese pythons and the other 15 exotic species are a significant threat to Florida's ecology, economy and human health and safety.

And managing the threat is not cheap. FWC and its federal partners spend more than \$8 million a year to manage not just the animals, but the destruction they cause. Iguanas burrow into and cause extensive damage to seawalls, canal banks, roads and water control structures. And dealing with tegu lizards alone consumes a third of the agency's budget for managing invasive species.

Several of Thursday's speakers pointed to the python's impact in the Everglades, especially.

"We've got to keep up this fight and get better at it," said Pedro Ramos, superintendent of Everglades National Park.

About 80% of mammal population has disappeared from Everglades National Park, Ramos said, with invasive snakes and other reptiles among the causes.

"We're investing billions of dollars to restore the Everglades. We cannot afford to have that work jeopardized by invasive species," said Chris Farrell, Northeast Florida policy associate for Audubon Florida.

Drew Bartlett, director of the South Florida Water Management District, had more of an issue with green iguanas. He said the levees and other infrastructure in his district are overrun by the lizard.

"It's all hands on deck when it comes to these invasive species," Bartlett said. "I spend hundreds of thousands of dollars every year dealing with iguanas on our infrastructure."

Under the new rule, FWC will not issue any new licenses to sell the 16 "high-risk" reptiles on the prohibited list.

Those currently breeding and selling the eight species of currently listed "Conditional" reptiles will no longer be able to do either for commercial use. Some reptile license-holders will be grandfathered in if they meet certain conditions. And people can keep their reptiles for the life of the animal with a free permit, but these species no longer will be allowed to be sold as pets in Florida.

Commercial breeding for sale of iguanas and tegus would sunset June 30, 2024.

When do the new rules begin?

Most of the other new rules would take effect in a few months, FWC officials have said.

The rule is almost certain to be challenged. Some past federal attempts to limit python sales haven't held up in court. In April 2017, the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld a lower court's decision that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service lacked authority under federal law to restrict interstate trade of Burmese pythons. The United States Association of Reptile Keepers, based in North Carolina, sued the federal government

in 2013 to undo a nationwide 2012 ban on importing pythons and other "constrictor" snakes or transporting them across state lines.

Currently, there are more than 5,000 licenses in Florida that authorize possession of wildlife in captivity, FWC says. The licenses cover a variety of native and nonnative species for activities including breeding, exhibition, sale and personal use.

Between 1999 and 2010, more than 12 million wild-caught reptiles were imported into the U.S., and of those more than 9 million reptiles were imported through Florida ports, FWC says.

The state agency estimates 180 of 593 introduced invasive species in Florida are reptiles, 92% of them introduced by the live trade of animals. FWC spends \$3 million a year managing invasive species, the agency says, with one of its primary priorities over the past few years being the Argentine black and white tegu, where almost \$1 million is being spent yearly in trying to reduce its population.

To help keep such invaders at bay, Florida wildlife officials hold Exotic Pet Amnesty Day events, where people can hand over their snakes and other exotic pets, which then get sent to zoos and other qualified adopters.

"One of the most difficult parts of this job is regulating livelihoods." Barreto said of Thursday's v. "I agree, the environment trumps the livelihood on this one, unfortunately."

Jim Waymer is environment reporter at FLORIDA TODAY.