

SB 376 (STERN)

WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING AND TRADE ACT

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SUMMARY

SB 376 seeks to address the conditions which led, in part, to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, namely wildlife trafficking and trade. This bill requires the Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) to suspend import permits for species potentially linked to novel zoonotic disease transmission if it has a scientific reason to do so, until there is a robust testing and treatment protocol. The bill also prevents live animal markets from selling non-native or invasive species.

THE PROBLEM

In SARS, MERS, and now COVID-19, initial human infection arose from viral transmission between wildlife and humans, such as bats and civets in the case of SARS. The virus that causes COVID-19 likely arose in a bat and passed through another mammal species in trade before making the jump to humans. The first widespread outbreak of COVID-19 was associated with a live wildlife market. Live wildlife are imported and sold in California for various purposes and there is potential risk to human health from the importation of such animals carrying viruses or other disease.

Hundreds of restricted species permits authorizing the possession of live wild animals are issued by CDFW each year. The COVID-19 pandemic illustrates how important it is to fully evaluate the risks those animals pose to Californians.

In addition to the threat to human health, wildlife imports also threaten our native wildlife. Nationally, it is estimated that non-native species have contributed to 68% of the fish extinctions in the past 100 years. Similarly, for amphibians, the chytrid fungus, which can be spread by a number of imported and invasive species, is linked to the extinction of over 100 species since the 1970s. More recently, in 2020 the first Californian cases of rabbit hemorrhagic disease, a highly infectious and lethal disease, were found in native jackrabbits. This disease likely arose in Europe but entered California via rabbits imported for pets or meat. Lastly, while COVID-19 arrived in the United States via human transmission, the virus has repeatedly jumped between humans and captive wildlife, including mink as well as various zoo animals. Such human/animal transmission events threaten both humans and wildlife and could lead to the outbreak of new and potentially more dangerous variants of the disease.

BACKGROUND

California must take the lead in protecting its residents and the state's native species by authorizing CDFW to better exercise its authority over the importation, possession and trade in live wild animals. Under current law, CDFW has clear authority to regulate the importation, transport and keeping of, for example, a live tiger due to the public safety threat the escape of such an animal would pose. However, CDFW's authority to regulate such species due to the disease risk they present is less explicit. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is increased recognition CDFW should have this authority as well.

THE SOLUTION

SB 376 takes a number of steps to address the multi-faceted problems of zoonotic disease and threats to biodiversity by: 1) limiting contact with potential animal disease carriers by allowing CDFW to suspend certain import permits until testing can prove the species is not a carrier of disease or proper testing and treatment, including quarantine, are available; and 2) end the sale of non-native and invasive species for human consumption in live animal markets.

SUPPORT

Social Compassion in Legislation (co-sponsor)
Center for Biological Diversity (co-sponsor)