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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
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HB53 - CRIMINAL LAW – NONDOMESTICATED ANIMAL PROHIBITIONS – ALTERATIONS
MARCH 25, 2026
FAVORABLE

CHAIR SMITH, VICE CHAIR WALDSTREICHER, AND MEMBERS OF THE JUDICIAL PROCEEDINGS COMMITTEE:

THANK YOU FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO PRESENT HOUSE BILL 53. HB53 PROPOSES A FOCUSED, NECESSARY UPDATE TO MARYLAND’S EXISTING LAW PROHIBITING THE TRADE, BREEDING OF, OR POSSESSION OF SPECIFIC WILD ANIMALS, BUT INCLUDES COMMON SENSE EXCEPTIONS. THE GOAL OF THIS LEGISLATION IS TO STRENGTHEN PUBLIC SAFETY, RELIEVE BURDENS ON LAW ENFORCEMENT AND ANIMAL MANAGEMENT STAFF, AND ENSURE THE HUMANE TREATMENT OF WILD ANIMALS.

MARYLAND LAW ALREADY PROHIBITS THE TRADE, BREEDING AND POSSESSION OF MANY INHERENTLY DANGEROUS SPECIES, INCLUDING BEARS, NONHUMAN PRIMATES, WILD CATS, AND CERTAIN VENOMOUS SNAKES, WITH EXCEPTIONS FOR CERTAIN LICENSED FACILITIES. IT HAS BEEN MORE THAN A DECADE SINCE THIS STATUTE WAS UPDATED. HB53 BUILDS ON THAT WELL ESTABLISHED FOUNDATION BY ADDING ZEBRAS, KANGAROOS, WALLABIES, AND WALLAROOS TO THE LIST. THESE ARE SPECIES WHOSE RECENT ESCAPE AND INJURY RECORDS MAKE CLEAR THAT THEY POSE SIGNIFICANT RISKS WHEN KEPT BY PRIVATE INDIVIDUALS. HB53 ALSO REPEALS AN OUTDATED EXEMPTION FOR CERTAIN SO-CALLED “HELPER ANIMALS” WITHOUT AFFECTING LEGITIMATE SERVICE ANIMALS.

PROTECTING PUBLIC SAFETY AND CONSERVING PUBLIC RESOURCES

PUBLIC SAFETY CONCERNS ARE NEITHER HYPOTHETICAL NOR RARE. IN 2021, MULTIPLE ZEBRAS ESCAPED FROM A USDA-LICENSED BREEDING FACILITY IN PRINCE GEORGE’S COUNTY AND ROAMED RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOODS FOR MONTHS, TRIGGERING A MULTI-AGENCY RESPONSE. SIMILAR PROBLEMS OCCUR NATIONWIDE AND INVOLVE OTHER SPECIES AS WELL: KANGAROOS, WALLABIES, AND WALLAROOS HAVE ESCAPED AT LEAST 83 TIMES ACROSS 25 STATES SINCE 2015 AND ADULT MALE KANGAROOS, REACHING UP TO 200 POUNDS, CAN INFLICT SERIOUS INJURIES. THESE INCIDENTS STRAIN ANIMAL CONTROL, LAW ENFORCEMENT AND MEDICAL RESPONSE RESOURCES AND HIGHLIGHT THAT PRIVATE INDIVIDUALS SIMPLY CANNOT MEET THE COMPLEX NEEDS OR SAFELY CONTAIN THESE WILD ANIMALS.

HB53 ENSURES THAT THESE SPECIES MAY ONLY BE KEPT BY LICENSED, REGULATED FACILITIES WITH APPROPRIATE EXPERTISE.

REPEALING AN OUTDATED EXEMPTION FOR CERTAIN SO-CALLED “HELPER ANIMALS”

ADDITIONALLY, THE BILL REMOVES ONE NARROW AND OUTDATED EXEMPTION THAT HISTORICALLY ALLOWED CERTAIN WILD ANIMALS, PRIMARILY NONHUMAN PRIMATES, TO BE USED AS SO-CALLED “HELPER” ANIMALS. THIS EXEMPTION IS INCONSISTENT WITH:

- THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT (ADA), WHICH SINCE 2010 RECOGNIZES ONLY DOGS (AND IN LIMITED CASES, MINIATURE HORSES) AS SERVICE ANIMALS
- THE AMERICAN VETERINARY MEDICAL ASSOCIATION, WHICH OPPOSES THE USE OF PRIMATES AS ASSISTANCE ANIMALS DUE TO THE HIGH RISKS OF HUMAN INJURY, ZOO NOTIC DISEASE TRANSMISSION AND SEVERE ANIMAL WELFARE CONCERNS
- MODERN DISABILITY ACCESS STANDARDS, WHICH EMPHASIZE SAFER AND MORE EFFECTIVE ALTERNATIVES SUCH AS ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

USING NONHUMAN PRIMATES AS “HELPER ANIMALS” IS BOTH DANGEROUS AND DEEPLY INHUMANE. NONHUMAN PRIMATES CAN TRANSMIT SERIOUS DISEASES, LIKE THE OFTEN-FATAL HERPES B VIRUS COMMONLY CARRIED BY MACAQUES, AND HAVE CAUSED HUNDREDS OF SEVERE INJURIES, MANY TO CHILDREN. PRIMATES BRED FOR THIS PURPOSE ARE TAKEN FROM THEIR MOTHERS EARLY, LEADING TO LIFELONG PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA, AND OFTEN ENDURE CRUEL PRACTICES SUCH AS TOOTH REMOVAL OR SHOCK-BASED TRAINING. EXPLOITING WILD ANIMALS IN THIS WAY IS UNNECESSARY AND ETHICALLY INDEFENSIBLE.

ALL MARYLAND SERVICE-ANIMAL STATUTES REMAIN INTACT

HB53 DOES NOT ALTER, LIMIT, OR AFFECT *ANY* OF MARYLAND’S EXISTING SERVICE ANIMAL PROGRAMS OR PROTECTIONS. ALL PROTECTIONS UNDER TITLES 7, 9, AND 10 REMAIN FULLY IN PLACE, INCLUDING THE STATE’S SERVICE ANIMAL PROGRAM, VETERAN SERVICE ANIMAL PROGRAM, COURT DOG PROGRAM, AND LAWS SAFEGUARDING SERVICE ANIMALS FROM HARM OR INTERFERENCE. THE LEGISLATION UPDATES WILD ANIMAL POSSESSION RULES WITHOUT ALTERING ANY RIGHTS OR ACCOMMODATION FOR PEOPLE WHO RELY ON LEGITIMATE SERVICE ANIMALS.

CONCLUSION

BY ADDING ZEBRAS, KANGAROOS, WALLABIES, AND WALLAROOS TO MARYLAND’S EXISTING WILD ANIMAL RESTRICTIONS, HB53 ENSURES THESE SPECIES ARE KEPT ONLY BY LICENSED FACILITIES SUBJECT TO THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE FEDERAL ANIMAL WELFARE ACT. HB53 STRENGTHENS PUBLIC SAFETY, REDUCES AVOIDABLE BURDENS ON LAW ENFORCEMENT, PROMOTES RESPONSIBLE STEWARDSHIP AND ENSURES MARYLAND LAW KEEPS PACE WITH MODERN SCIENCE AND SERVICE ANIMAL STANDARDS. THIS LEGISLATION IS MEASURED, AND IT BUILDS ON THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY’S LONGSTANDING APPROACH TO PROTECTING COMMUNITIES FROM INHERENTLY RISKY WILD ANIMALS.

FOR THESE REASONS, I RESPECTFULLY URGE THE COMMITTEE TO GIVE HOUSE BILL 53 A FAVORABLE REPORT. THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION.

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