The International Fund for Animal Welfare is calling on Congress to pass The Big Cats and Public Safety Protection Act.

Passing this bill will finally mean that captive big cats—tigers, lions, cougars and other species—do not threaten public safety, diminish global conservation efforts, or end up living in deplorable conditions.

An estimated 10,000 big cats are kept as pets and for profit in places like basements, backyards and roadside zoos throughout the U.S. today. In fact, the U.S. is thought to be home to more captive tigers than are found in the wild. Exact numbers are a mystery—nobody knows exactly how many dangerous big cats are being kept in private hands, under what conditions, and where.

Passing The Big Cats and Public Safety Protection Act would mean:

» An amendment to the Captive Wildlife Safety Act to generally end private possession and breeding of lions, tigers, leopards, snow leopards, clouded leopards, cheetahs, jaguars, and cougars, as well as any hybrid of these species.

» A grandfather provision for current big cat owners that allows individuals to continue keeping their animals as long as they register them with the U.S. Department of Agriculture within a year after the bill becomes law.

» Exemptions for the following: Zoos accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) or certified related facilities that coordinate with an AZA Species Survival Plan for breeding of species listed as threatened or endangered; wildlife sanctuaries that do not breed or allow public handling of the animals; wildlife rehabilitators; state colleges and universities; and select traveling circuses in compliance with the Animal Welfare Act.

» Penalties for violations: Violators of the law could have their animals confiscated, along with any equipment used in violation, and could face fines up to $20,000 and up to five years in jail.

Go to www.ifaw.org/bigcatadvocates to learn more.
KEEPING BIG CATS IN PRIVATE HANDS IS A PUBLIC SAFETY ISSUE.
In just the past two decades, dangerous incidents involving captive big cats in the U.S. have resulted in the deaths of 24 people (including 5 children), and over 200 additional humans have been maimed or injured. These are just the incidents reported by the media.

Some of the more high profile examples include:
- March 2013: A 24-year-old sanctuary intern was killed while cleaning the enclosure of an adult male African lion, which led to the animal being shot by authorities. The incident took place at a sanctuary that breeds and frequently transports its big cats for public display.
- October 2011: The owner of a backyard menagerie in Ohio opened the cage of its tigers, lions and other exotic beasts before killing himself, giving police no choice but to shoot and kill nearly 50 animals—38 of them big cats—before they could enter populated areas of the community.
- August 2005: A teenage girl in Kansas was attacked and killed by a 550-pound Siberian tiger held on a leash during a school photo shoot.
- October 2001: A three-year old in Texas was killed by one of his relative’s pet tigers as he was preparing to take a photo with the animal.

KEEPING BIG CATS IN PRIVATE HANDS IS AN ANIMAL WELFARE ISSUE.
Big cats are wild animals and suffer when forced to be ‘backyard pets’. Private owners are not able to manage them once they’re ‘tame’. Consequently, the animals are frequently abused and left to spend their entire lives in cages with barely enough room to move. Meanwhile, unscrupulous exhibitors—including those with USDA licenses—intensively breed big cats to feed the trade, where tiger cubs and other felids are prematurely taken from their mothers in order to be constantly held and photographed to breed or acquire more of these species.

KEEPING BIG CATS IN PRIVATE HANDS IS A GLOBAL WILDLIFE CONSERVATION ISSUE.
Private possession and breeding of big cats contributes to the interstate traffic in these species and may contribute to illegal international wildlife trade. There is no way to know how many U.S.-born big cats are disposed of or when their parts are illegally sold into black market trade. This is a particular threat to tigers. Recently, the World Bank’s Global Tiger Initiative called upon the U.S. to phase out its private captive tiger population for this very reason.

PRIVATE POSSESSION OF BIG CATS IS A FISCAL AND ENFORCEMENT NIGHTMARE.
Big cats cost $10,000 a year on average just to feed, and need huge spaces to roam. Many big cat owners, even those with good intentions, quickly realize they are in over their heads.

Local law enforcement and other first responders are neither trained nor financially equipped to deal with animals the likes of a 300-pound tiger, and taxpayers must pay the cost when animals escape or otherwise jeopardize the community. Furthermore, the USDA does not have the resources to adequately inspect big cat licensees and enforce Animal Welfare Act compliance. It is also exceedingly difficult to distinguish between prohibited wildlife species that are possessed, bred, sold, or transported in interstate commerce from those that are not. Adding to this difficulty is the fact that a recent audit of the USDA by the Office of the Inspector General found that 70 percent of USDA licensees with four or less animals are actually “pet” owners just using their USDA license to take advantage of USDA exemptions in state laws.

KEEPING BIG CATS IN PRIVATE HANDS IS A NATIONWIDE PROBLEM IN NEED OF A FEDERAL SOLUTION.
Private possession and breeding of prohibited wildlife species contributes to the interstate traffic in those species and may contribute to illegal international wildlife trade. With some states banning private ownership of big cats, other states imposing partial to no restrictions whatsoever, and most states (but for Kentucky, Ohio and Washington) exempting USDA licensees, this regulatory patchwork is failing to protect public safety and animal welfare. Meanwhile, the USDA does not have the resources to adequately enforce the current regulatory regime, which is already broken.

Q&A

Isn’t keeping exotic pets a state issue?
Not at all. Possession and breeding of big cats is a federal issue because both activities have substantial and direct effects on interstate commerce. Big Cats are frequently bred and used for public exhibits across the United States. They are also sold and transferred throughout the states to supply the exotic pet trade. Federal oversight is necessary.

Can’t unwanted big cats just be placed in wildlife sanctuaries?
As much good will as they do, sanctuaries are not the answer. Since 2003, IFAW has worked with reputable sanctuaries to rescue more than 150 tigers, lions, and other big cats from unsanctioned shelters, bankrupt sanctuaries and other unsafe living conditions across the nation. But we cannot simply rely on sanctuaries to take in all those animals—most are nearing or are at capacity and lack financial reserves for more than a few months of operating expenses.

What will happen to the big cats currently in private possession?
Anyone who currently has a big cat (lion, tiger, leopard, snow leopard, clouded leopard, cheetah, jaguar, and cougars, or any hybrid of these species) would be simply required to register their animals with the USDA. A year after the bill is signed into law, they would just not be allowed to breed or acquire more of these species.

Does this mean we won’t be able to see tigers in zoos anymore?
No. The bill would make it illegal to possess any big cats except at facilities accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums because they have strict and standardized safeguards in place for proper care and handling of big cats. The bill also exempts reputable sanctuaries and circuses that do not allow public handling of animals in exhibition.

Aren’t big cats raised in captivity just like domesticated pets?
Unlike companion animals who have been domesticated over centuries, big cats always retain their natural instinct to hunt and attack and cannot ever be “tamed.” It doesn’t matter that they were born in the U.S. or have been bottle-fed and around people their entire lives: a wild animal will always be a wild animal.

The incident at Zanesville, Ohio—where 38 big cats and other wild animals were released from their cages—was a tragedy, but isn’t this bill taking things too far?
Zanesville was, by far, not the first time that tragedies involving big cats have occurred. Unlike Zanesville, many incidents have resulted in human fatalities. In the name of public safety, animal welfare, wildlife conservation and economic security, it is time for a federal solution. Congress should take action and pass the Big Cats and Public Safety Protection Act before another incident occurs.

To learn more about the Big Cats and Public Safety Protection Act, go to www.ifaw.org/bigcatadvocates.