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 In this Oct. 19, 2011, file photo obtained by the Associated Press, carcasses lie on the ground at the Muskingum County Animal Farm in Zanesville, Ohio. More than two dozen tigers, leopards and lions were hunted by sheriff's deputies after Terry Thompson freed the animals on Oct. 18, 2011, before killing himself. Legislation has been proposed in Congress that would ban private ownership of exotic cats. Ohio and other states are also looking to outlaw the animals or keep them more tightly controlled.

# Ohio wild animal stampede ignites vast law review

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Of all the beasts set free by the suicidal owner of an exotic animal farm in Ohio last year, few were as scary or as lethal as the big cats.

Tigers, leopards and lions — more than two dozen — were loose before being hunted by sheriff's deputies.

While the slaughter was chilling, it was truly panic-inducing that an unstable owner had accumulated such a collection of dangerous animals.

Yet, by some estimates, there are thousands of tigers in captivity in American backyards — more than there are in the wild on the planet.

No one knows the number for certain because there's only scattered regulation for such pets. In fact, it's easier in some states to buy a tiger or lion from a breeder than it is to adopt a kitten from a shelter.

That's likely to change after the Zanesville stampede drew the attention of lawmakers around the country.

Legislation has been proposed in Congress that would ban private ownership of exotic cats. Ohio and other states are also looking to outlaw the animals or to keep them more tightly controlled.

One leader of the cat fight is actress and animal activist Tippi Hedren, best known for being terrorized by crows in Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds."

Hedren has devoted much of her life to rescuing big cats at her Shambala Preserve north of Los Angeles, home to 53 seized or abandoned exotic cats, and she doesn't think they make good pets.

"It is the job of the predator to take out any old, sick or lame animal. What quality there makes for a good pet?" she asked. "If you get near its food, it will kill you."

The Zanesville animals may have forced the issue into the open, but it certainly isn't the first tragedy involving private cats.

Since 1990, 21 people, including five children, have been killed and 246 mauled, according to Big Cat Rescue in Tampa, Fla. Over that period, 254 cats have escaped and 143 have been killed.

There have been other federal laws proposed over the years, but most have failed.

Deputies shot nearly 50 wild animals freed on Oct. 18 at Muskingum County Animal Farm near Zanesville. Owner Terry Thompson opened their cages before committing suicide. Some believe it was one last act of retaliation against neighbors and authorities.

Reps. Howard "Buck" McKeon, R-Calif., and Loretta Sanchez, D-Calif., introduced the Big Cats and Public Safety Protection

Act in February to require owners of tigers, lions, leopards, jaguars, cheetahs, panthers and other cats to register with the Department of Agriculture. Breeding would be banned except at accredited zoos and research and educational institutions. Penalties would include seizures, fines and jail.

"When accidents happen and these wild cats are released into our neighborhoods, it causes panic, puts a strain on our local public safety responders and is extremely dangerous," McKeon said. He believes his bill will protect the public and the cats.

In Ohio, the state Senate recently passed a bill that would ban new ownership of lions, monkeys and other exotic animals, but allows current owners to keep their animals by obtaining a new state-issued permit by 2014 and meeting other strict conditions. It now goes to the House for consideration.

Meanwhile, the Ohio Department of Agriculture announced Monday that it will return five surviving exotic animals, including two leopards, to Terry Thompson's widow, Marian Thompson.

Virginia, Arizona, Missouri, West Virginia, Tennessee, Indiana and Oklahoma are also considering exotic animal bans, according to Uappeal, an exotic animal lobbying group.

Currently, no single agency oversees how big cats are kept or treated. The Association of Zoos and Aquariums and USDA have some regulations. Some states, counties and cities have laws but many don't.

The federal bill has the backing of the International Fund for Animal Welfare, Born Free USA and other groups. But fans of the majestic beasts are in an uproar.

"All a ban law will do is force all these people to go underground and it will not help the animals at all," said Joseph Schreibvogel, president of the United States Zoological Association, which advocates on behalf of wild animal owners.

Lynn Culver, executive director of the Feline Conservation Federation, thinks the number of people who keep exotic cats as pets has been hugely inflated by proponents of the House bill. She says the bill will interfere with captive conservation and bring an end to circus and stage acts and cats in movies and on television.

"Independent zoos will be allowed to keep their existing animals but when the cats die, there will be zoos without big cats and that's tragic," Culver said. "Big cats are charismatic species, key to the success of any zoo or wildlife exhibit."

*"It is the job of the predator to take out any old, sick or lame animal. What quality there makes for a good pet?"*

**Tippi Hedren**  
 Actress and animal activist



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 In this Jan. 31 photo showing Bobbi Brink, the owner of the Lions, Tigers, and Bears rescue facility, feeds chicken to Raja, a 17-year-old male tiger in Alpine, Calif. Brink started her sanctuary in 2002 after rescuing tigers Raja and Natasha from a Texas man who was ordered to upgrade their 6-foot-by-12-foot cages or find new homes for them.

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