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## Legislation would ban 'leg hold' traps

by Megan Hartley | Capital News Service  
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Annapolis — The Maryland General Assembly is considering legislation that would ban the most popular tool for recreational and commercial fur trapping in the state — pitting fur trappers and wildlife officials against animal rights activists in a contentious battle over what is humane.

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The legislation would ban the use of steel-jawed leg hold traps, which are the most common and effective form of trapping animals alive. Animal rights activists such as the Humane Society of the United States say the traps not only catch non-target animals such as cats and dogs but are also inhumane because they can break bones and sometimes cause animals to chew off limbs to escape.

But there is much debate over whether the trap is actually inhumane. Maryland Department of Natural Resources officials as well as the United States Department of Agriculture say the traps, if used properly, are safe. The traps were integral to the relocation of wolf populations from Canada to Yellowstone National Park.

“We consider this a non-lethal tool. We have lethal tools, they are called firearms,” said Kevin J. Sullivan, an agriculture department official, at a Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee hearing Tuesday.

The trap consists of two half-moon shaped pieces of metal hinged together with a powerful spring. When an animal steps in the trap, the halves firmly clamp together holding the animals paw, claw or foot in place.

Commercial and recreational fur trappers as well as farmers, who use them to eliminate nuisance animals, fear a loss of revenue and way of life if the legislation passes. Fur trappers use live traps because it is the most effective way to preserve a pelt. Coats can be ruined when animals lay dead for hours in a trap.

Dawn Penney, a small farmer in Carroll County, says the bill will discriminate against her.

“If Maryland allows commercial and recreational fisherman, but no commercial and recreational trappers that is blatant discrimination,” said Penney.

She said her father asked her to step on a steel-jawed leg hold trap when she was young to prove it was safe. “He said ‘step on that trap,’ and so I did and it didn’t hurt me,” said Penney.

Farmers need the tool to eliminate nuisance animals on their land, said Kurt Fuchs of the Maryland Farm Bureau.

“Tens of thousands of dollars worth of damage is done by nuisance fur bearers. We need to keep the tool as a viable option so that trappers come on to farmers’ land,” said Fuchs.

But the Maryland Veterinary Medical Association and the Human Society disagree.



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Pierre Grzybowski of the Humane Society Legislative Fund brought a steel-jawed leg hold trap to the hearing and snapped a pencil with it to demonstrate what would happen to the bone of an animal like a cat or a rabbit that got caught in the trap.

Current law requires trappers to check their traps every 24 to 36 hours, which means an animal is often caught in the trap for a long time — sometimes chewing its own limb off.

Ann Katcef, an animal rights activist, said she heard screaming in the woods behind her house while laying bedding down for some local feral cats before an ice storm. The cry was so loud she thought a child had been hurt.

“I saw a cat coming towards me, she had three legs and something hanging from her shoulder,” said Katcef. The cat had been caught in a steel-jawed leg hold trap and chewed its own leg off. Katcef was able to save the cat, which she named Stormy, and has since been adopted.

“I paid \$500 in veterinarian bills all for someone who wanted a few dollars for a pelt,” said Katcef.

If the bill passes, wildlife officials will bear the brunt of dealing with nuisance fur-bearing animals.

Without commercial and recreational fur trappers, nuisance animal complaints will increase, meaning state employees will have to take care of them. The bill allows state agencies like DNR to continue using the traps.

“If you take this tool out of the toolbox we would have to hire a small army of people to do what they were already doing with the same exact trap,” said Paul Peditto wildlife and heritage service director for DNR.

But the Humane Society says DNR officials check the traps more often and are more careful. Michael Markarian, executive vice president for external affairs for the Humane Society says wildlife officials often get to the trapped animal “within minutes.”

Legislation involving the steel-jawed leg hold trap in the Maryland General Assembly is not new.

It has been introduced every year since 2001 and each time it has been voted down.

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