



**THE HUMANE SOCIETY  
OF THE UNITED STATES**

January 14, 2020

Representative Julie Alexander  
Chair, Agriculture Committee  
Michigan House of Representatives

Via email: Dakota Soda, Committee Clerk, dsoda@house.mi.gov

Re: Oppose HB 4860, a bill to amend the Large Carnivore Act

Dear Chair Alexander and Committee Members:

The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) strongly opposes House Bill 4860, a bill that amends Section 22 of the Large Carnivore Act to allow those who do not reside in Michigan to be exempted from a variety of regulations pertaining to black bears.

Michigan's Large Carnivore Act was recently weakened to allow the public to handle 9-month-old bear cubs weighing up to 90 pounds. While there appears to currently be only one Michigan facility engaged in this unethical and harmful practice, HB 4860 would allow out-of-state exhibitors to enter the state and put both the public and bears in harm's way by offering public contact. There is no safe or humane way to allow for public contact with bears of any age.

Bears used for public handling are pulled from their mothers shortly after birth to be hand-raised, a practice that denies newborns essential nutrients and antibodies as well as critical maternal care. Hand-reared bears can be plagued with behavioral issues like entrenched neurotic behaviors their entire lives. Infant animals with weak immune systems are subjected to stressful conditions associated with public handling. Physical abuse may be used on playful, hungry, or stressed bear cubs who are required to sit still for a photo op.

Bear cubs frequently have round worms, which human children are particularly susceptible to due to hand-to-mouth contact. Since bear claws are not retractable, these animals pose a public safety risk even at very young ages.

Breeding bears for temporary use in public handling leads to a surplus of unwanted older animals, who may be warehoused at substandard facilities, sold into the pet trade, or killed when they are no longer useful. The more captive bears in a state, particularly at facilities that are not accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, the greater chance there is for an attack or escape. Michigan is one of only six states where a person has been killed by a captive bear since 1990.

Public contact is an activity that is poorly regulated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), yet HB 4860 leaves it up to the federal government to regulate out-of-state

exhibitors who might offer public contact with bears while traveling through Michigan. To make matters worse, the USDA's already-weak enforcement of the Animal Welfare Act has declined dramatically in the past few years with the agency issuing far fewer citations, warnings, and penalties even for serious violations. And notably, in the event of an attack or escape involving a captive bear, local authorities will be burdened with addressing the emergency, not the USDA.

Oswald's Bear Ranch in Newberry, Michigan, with more than three dozen black bears, offers public contact with bear cubs and graphically illustrates our concerns. In 2010, Oswald was cited by the USDA for using physical abuse to discipline a bear cub. An employee repeatedly hit a bear cub while the animal was being used for photo opportunities with the public. Oswald has been cited twice for allowing the public, including children, to have unsafe contact with bear cubs. In one case a person was scratched, and the wound became infected. In 2019, two bears escaped, climbing over 10-foot and 8-foot fences, and wandered onto neighboring properties. One of the bears was tranquilized and brought back to Oswald's. The other, a 150-pound bear named Sophie, was spotted by a neighbor who called 911. When Sophie approached a responding sheriff's deputy, she was shot and killed.

We respectfully urge the Agriculture Committee to oppose any further weakening of Michigan's Large Carnivore Act. Thank you for giving this matter your consideration and for the opportunity to share comments. Please feel free to contact me for additional information.

Sincerely,

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