



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE



Testimony presented to the Environment Committee of

The Connecticut General Assembly

By the Connecticut Department of Agriculture

March 7, 2012

H.B. 5323 An Act Concerning Biting Dogs

The Connecticut Department of Agriculture is opposed to H.B. 5323 An Act Concerning Biting Dogs.

The existing provisions of C.G.S. § 22-358 authorize animal control officials to take the necessary and important actions to protect public safety and, more importantly, public health as it relates to the control of rabies. Our opposition to the proposed bill centers on the fact that rabies is a deadly disease and anything less than the quarantine of a dog that bites a person while off its property severely compromises rabies control and prevention.

The prevention of the spread of rabies is imperative. Rabies is an insidious viral infection that nearly always results in fatal encephalitis. Humans are exposed to rabies primarily through the bite of a rabid animal or when the virus is introduced into fresh open cuts in the skin or onto mucous membranes such as the eyes, mouth or nose from the saliva of a rabid animal. It is critical to recognize that domestic animals with rabies can transmit infection to other animals and people before they manifest signs of the disease. A single infected animal can result in the potential exposure of many people requiring identification, evaluation, counseling and preventative treatment at considerable costs to prevent fatal human infection.

Human cases of rabies in the United States has become quite rare due to concerted efforts to vaccinate companion animals that serve as vectors between infected wildlife and humans and strict adherence to nationally accepted standards of rabies response and control protocols including those that address bite incidents. However, rabies is not a rare disease in other animals. We live in a "relative sea" of rabies which results in numerous potential human and companion animal exposures each year. In Connecticut, rabies is constantly present in wildlife with raccoons serving as the principal reservoir among terrestrial animals. Any contact with a wild animal that is a rabies vector species (raccoon, skunk, fox, bat, etc.) presents a risk of infection. Once an animal has become infected by a rabid animal, the incubation period may vary from a few days to several months. Because rabies may be contagious before any clinical signs appear, healthy looking animals can transmit the disease. It is possible for the animal to be shedding the virus in their saliva for up to 10 days before the onset of abnormal neurological signs and resultant death. Transmission of the rabies virus to people and domestic animals is a very real possibility and concern.

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The fourteen-day quarantine provisions for animals that bite humans, as is currently authorized in C.G.S. §22-358, serves two important purposes: (1) it provides for the secure isolation of the biting animal for the purposes of observation for signs of rabies on which human rabies post exposure prophylaxis treatment may be based and (2) it isolates the biting animal from contact with other humans and animals if the animal is infected with rabies preventing further transmission.

The proposed language of the bill provides animal control officials with alternative means of managing biting dogs that falls far short of and not consistent with accepted national standards and those that have proven successful in Connecticut in preventing human rabies; it compromises the secure isolation of the biting dog for observation and compromises the prevention of contact with other humans and animals; it may lead to unnecessary post exposure rabies prophylaxis treatment of humans that have had contact with the biting dog if the dog escapes; and, finally, it will place animal control officials, especially on the municipal level, with nebulous guidelines not consistent with accepted standards and expose them to undue pressure and influence from biting dog owners to opt for the proposed alternative to quarantine.

The Department relies on the guidance provided by the Compendium of Animal Rabies Prevention and Control published by the National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians and adopted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's in determining the measures necessary to absolutely prevent the spread of rabies. It also relies on the protocols in the Connecticut Rabies Manual that have been developed, based on national standards, by the interagency efforts of the Departments of Agriculture, Public Health and Energy and Environmental Protection with input from the Connecticut Veterinary Medical Association and municipal animal control officers.

The measures outlined in H.B. 5323: a dog obedience school program, a physical barrier, rural housing and fencing and allowing an animal suspected of rabies exposure to be off the owner's premises while muzzled falls far short of the standards commonly accepted as the measures required in order to manage dogs that bite humans in order to adequately protect public health and safety.

The Department strongly recommends rejection of the proposed legislation. The provisions of the current law have a proven record of success in preventing human rabies.

Thank you for your consideration of the Department's written testimony on HB 5323.