

Environment Committee JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: SB-196
AN ACT CONCERNING THE HARVESTING OF RABBITS FOR THE LOCAL
Title: FOOD SUPPLY.
Vote Date: 3/20/2024
Vote Action: Joint Favorable
PH Date: 3/8/2024
File No.:

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Environment Committee

REASONS FOR BILL:

Rabbit meat is a lean source of protein, with current production allowed in the state but subject to limitations due to administrative troubles. The allowance of the Commissioner of the Department of Agriculture to inspect and approve facilities for food production could help to improve the economics of farming rabbits.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION AGENCY:

None expressed.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Ali Ghiorse, Founder, The Foodshed Network:

The Network believe that Connecticut needs a diversity of locally produced and harvested protein sources to minimize our dependance on uncertain global supply chains. They believe humanely raised and harvested production, such as rabbits, help farmers stay viable and continue farming while providing restaurants and residents with a valuable food source. They state production of rabbits in Connecticut is not factory farming, and the rabbits are not considered domestic animals. They also note that rabbit is common food in many cultures, including Greek, Ukrainian, French, Chinese, and Italian cuisine.

The following also submitted testimony with the same reasons:

Meg Hourigan, Coordinator, Connecticut Food Systems Alliance

Joan Nichols, Executive Director, Connecticut Farm Bureau

The Farm Bureau urges the Committees support in establishing an inspection program, administered by the Connecticut Department of Agriculture, for the processing of rabbits to supply local restaurants and consumers. They believe this program would further diversify the variety of locally grown protein available to consumers and provide an efficient and safe on-farm processing program for those farmers who want to enter this marketplace. Connecticut restaurants and consumers can purchase rabbit from wholesale food suppliers which procure their products both domestically and internationally. They believe we should prioritize procuring our food from Connecticut farmers who provide jobs and contribute to the state's economy. They believe the Connecticut Department of Agriculture is well-equipped to administer this program based on the success of the small poultry processing program.

Penny Young:

The testifier is an enthusiastic cook who only buys meat from local farms. With rabbit being a very healthy protein source, they seek to cook dishes with it. They found rabbit at a facility in Manchester, but the rabbit was sourced from China. They believe they would have to order online to get rabbit from Pennsylvania, but would prefer to purchase from a local farmer here in Connecticut.

The following submitted testimony solely expressing their support for the bill:

Leslie Frankel; Sandra MacGregor

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

Colette Griffin, Board Chair, CT Votes for Animals

The testifier believes rabbits are intelligent, gentle, and curious animals which are the third most common family pet. The USDA does not include rabbits in its definition of livestock; they are not protected by their laws and regulations. They believe the dual categorization of rabbits as both companion animals and animals raised for food leaves rabbits raised for meat unprotected in the unregulated industry.

Deborah Galle, Board Member, CWRA

The testifier states their belief that this bill could increase the prevalence of Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease Virus Type 2 in the state, which could threaten the wildlife in the state if it were to spread beyond facilities. They note the numerous ways in which the virus can spread, including insects and direct contact. Ultimately they note DEEP's efforts to reestablish the New England Cottontail as one of the reasons why the state should not pursue this bill.

Annie Hornish, Connecticut State Director, The Humane Society of the United States

HSUS supports Connecticut's fight to protect rabbits as they believe rabbits are smart sociable animals with unique personalities who would suffer if kept in conditions that would certainly occur with rabbits raised for food on a large scale. They also raise concerns about Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease, which is a concern for both wild and domestic rabbits. They believe an expansion of rabbit meat industry would exacerbate the problem, as well as lead to further cruelty in the fight against factory farming.

Stephen Mendelsohn

The testifier provides a summary of the way in which rabbits are processed to be slaughtered, with a graphic description of the ways in which they are fattened and ultimately

inhumanely killed. They suggest that Connecticut should pass regulations requiring the humane treatment of animals bred for food instead.

Thompson G. Page, Founder & General Counsel, The Center for Animal Litigation

The Center opposes this legislation which would authorize commercial farming of rabbits for human consumption because rabbits are companion animals, which leads them to believe there is no market for rabbit meat in the state. They note the existence of the "Leaping Bunny Program", which consumers use to identify non-animal tested products. The testifier also decries the practice of factory farming animals, which they believe to increase the risk of disease and therefore warrants expensive costs associated with monitoring it.

Jo Anne Roberts, Attorney

The testifier expressed concerns with numerous sections of the bill

- 1) They note that "rabbit processing facility" is not defined and discuss how federal laws allow for meat processing of other animals, but do not refer to rabbits.
- 2) They raise concerns as to whether rabbit processing facilities will need to be certified as official plants as required in Title 9, Chapter III, Subchapter A, Part 354 of the CFR before inspections are able to be conducted on the facility.
- 3) They raise questions as to the vigorousness of enforcement of the Humane Slaughter Act and sections 22-272a of the Connecticut general statutes.

Susan Linker, CEO, Our Companions Animal Rescue

The testifier notes that the USDA does not include rabbits in their definition of livestock, which would lead them to be exempt from the protections this provides. They believe this bill would increase the cruelty felt by the rabbits, with a non-existent demand for the product not warranting the need.

Karen Laski, Board Member, CT Votes for Animals

The testifier states their belief that the farming of rabbits would be a cruel practice; they state that given the Wholefoods abandonment of selling rabbit meat there is no evidence for demand for the practice.

Marlene Wilhelm, President, The House Rabbit Connection

The group express opposition to the bill on three points:

- 1) They express the belief that factory farming causes deforestation and water scarcity, as well as producing hydrogen sulfide and ammonia to pollute the atmosphere.
- 2) They express concerns at overcrowding and extreme confinement within the farms, with disease transmission and the use of antibiotics generating treatment resistant strains.
- 3) They express concern for the health of slaughter house workers, who often suffer from PTSD as a result of the practices they have to carry out at the facilities.

Rebecca Bernardo, President, Everybunny Counts Rabbit Rescue

The testifier expresses opposition to rewriting Volume 8, Section 22 of the General Statutes to remove rabbits as companion animals. They note the 24% prevalence rate for MRSA infections in slaughterhouse rabbits in a 2020 study, and decry inhumane practices for keeping rabbits in small living conditions for their entire lives.

Many testimony pieces submitted discussed the following points:

- 1) The prevalence of households with rabbits as pets and the outrage they anticipate from farming them. Many express the belief that there is little demand for rabbit meat.**
- 2) The risk to the welfare of the rabbits by inhumanely farming them, with many noting the lack of USDA categorization of rabbits as livestock. Some noted the desire for cruelty free products.**
- 3) The increased risk of RHDV2 in the state. Some noted rabbits' immune systems, with the risk of prophylactic usage of antibiotics creating resistant strains of microbes.**
- 4) Some expressed concerns for the climate, with suggestions of switching to plant-based protein instead of furthering meat consumption.**

Brenda Boyd; Joseph Mangeno Jr.; Keeley Mangeno; Maureen Mangeno; Joseph Mangeno III; Ellen & Bob Seger; Jennifer McGuinness; Andrew Thomas; Anonymous 1-25; Kathleen Radziunas; Kasey Moreira; Carrie Gonzalez; Jennifer Ki; Kate & Kelly Marchwinski; Lisa Bonaldi; Lisa Mentis; Gail Craig; Anna Farrelly; Nicole Bruck; Jaimie Cura; Susan Kautz; Karen Jalbert; Rosamund Downing; Melissa Debies-Carl; Brittany Hart; Paula Snedeker; Sara Pereiras; Rob McGuinness; Dawn Boothe; Nicole Funk; Lynette Pineda; Kirsta MacLellan; Jeffrey Jump; Jill Alibrandi; Fred Garbonola; Lyla Frick; Alison Zyla; Shirley McCarthy; Joshua Warchol; Beau Couden; Cathy Popp; Michael Brandi; Judy Wyman; Dorothy Rich; Marilyn Kopf; Yajaira Martinez; Val Maloney; Wendy Whyko-Marolda; Timothy Gabriele; Phillip Sobask; Andrea Kerin; Glaucia Lolli; Diane Sauer; Amanda DeMarco; Hannah Linnell; Lois & Daniel Rosenberg; Christine Zaleski; Cheryl Moss; Sherry Wernicke; Barbara Biel; Svetlana Wasserman; Hope Maruzo; Linda Malie; Donna DeMuis Dekle; Joan McCoy; Anne Mazzone; Danee Ashforf; Linda Sisson; Tracey Laszloffy; Bret Pereiras; Wendy Shanahan; Wendy Horowitz; Molly Abrahams; Kathleen Walsh; Stephanie Latham-Magee; Elizabeth Russell; Laura Boswerger; Roberta Helling; Valerie Charbonneau; Eileen Sypher; Jacqueline Zoeller; Sam Beck; Edward Pennick; Elizabeth Baym; Allyson Dwyer; Linda Thibault; Audrey Baehr; Nicole Distefano; Ray Fratus; Melissa Mancini; Danielle Rivard; Steven Andrychowski; Thomas Barber; Halja Mohammed; Aubrey Cyr; Patricia Harmon; Meghan Thomas; Wendy Ruggeri; Lisa Hey; Sally Westcott; Dawn Bruneau; Jennifer Cioffi; Lisa Tobias; Mary Bartkus; Katherine Campoli; Christine ONeill; Daryl Bartkus; John Ostaszewski; Theresa Kaiser; Keegan Jalbert; Terry Tracz; Debra Bologna; Peggy Carpenter; Jessica Milana; Ingrid Casas; Kathleen Dav; Kristin Baldasaro, Vice President, Everybunny Counts Rabbit Rescue; Sheryl Pierson; Heather HarrisonRouillar; Christine Cummings, Director, A Place Called Hope; Colette Breton; Elizabeth Quattrochi; Genessis Vaquerano; Erin Mostoller; Emelia Demuis; Lindsay Riley; Susan Helm; Cierra Reyes; Jen Strausser; Janice Giordano; Julie Lewin; Melissa Bird; Mary-Ann Gubala; Amberleigh Maida; James Hirshfield; Ann Clark; Erin McDonnell; Travis Palmer; Jayna Larkin; Patricia Pehr; Lauren Settini; Amy Merriman; Laura Lynch; Alyssa Foster; Bonnie Margolis; Alan Long; Elisha Dreisch; Tina Aronson; Sonja Zinke; Jennifer Long; Andrew Montgomery; Kristin Gibson; Pete Martel; Sheila Daniels; Nancy Rosen; Karissa Vaillancourt; Shanice Joaquin; Carollynn Goldenberg; Bonita Izen; Claire Burdick; Kirsten Birish; Wendy Schappert; Mary Rea; Stephanie Lionetti; Sheriden Franklin; Tracy Gabriel; Nancy Murphy; Kathy DiLullo; Lucia Dittmann; Melvie Hatfield; Andrea Dobras, Secretary, Connecticut For Animals Education Fund; Regina Milano; Ruth Roche; Kathleen Sullivan; Debra Curtis; Edward Bohan; Elizabeth Kiernan; Nan Zyla-Wisensale; Jamila Viandier.

Reported by: Jim McNealey & Judy Ganswindt Date: April 2nd, 2024