

FERRET RABIES QUARANTINE

House Bill 5219 (Substitute H-1) First Analysis (2-17-98)

Sponsor: Rep. Eileen DeHart
Committee: Agriculture

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

According to the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council, millions of Americans own one or more "domestic ferrets" (*Mustela furo*) as pets, making this animal the third most popular pet (not including fish) in America after cats and dogs. Ferret owners in Michigan and throughout the country were outraged last June when a pet ferret was killed in order to be tested for rabies after allegedly having bitten someone. While pet dogs and cats are quarantined for 10 days when a bite incident occurs to determine whether the animal has rabies, no such provisions are made for pet ferrets. A pet ferret that may have exposed a person or another animal to rabies by biting, scratching or similar activity is required to be handled in accordance with the current published guidelines of the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Although the CDC rules recommend that an individualized inquiry be made in such cases, the usual result is that the ferret is killed, its head is removed and its brain tested for rabies.

In the case of dogs and cats, it has long been established that if the pet has not shown clear symptoms of rabies within ten days after the bite or scratch incident, then the pet could not have exposed the person to the disease. (See *BACKGROUND INFORMATION*) The time period during which an infected animal transmits the virus is known as the shedding period, and until recently there were no widely accepted studies regarding the length of the rabies shedding period for ferrets. As a result, there was some disagreement about whether a 10-day quarantine period could be safely applied to ferrets. However, a recently completed study of the pathogenesis (origination and transfer) of the rabies virus in domestic ferrets concluded that a confinement and observation period of 10 days after a ferret bites someone should be sufficient to protect public health. As a result, many people believe that Michigan should change its laws regarding the treatment of ferrets that have bitten someone so that the owners of pet ferrets may have their pets quarantined instead of destroyed.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

Public Act 358 of 1994 legalized the possession of domestic ferrets as pets, and requires ferret owners to

have the animals vaccinated against rabies. Further, the act requires that the owner of a ferret that has potentially exposed a person or another animal to rabies -- by "biting, scratching, causing abrasions, or contaminating open wounds or mucous membranes with saliva or other infectious material" -- handle the ferret in accordance with current published guidelines of the federal Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). House Bill 5219 would amend the act to modify this provision. Under the bill, a ferret who may have exposed a person or another animal to rabies would have to be handled according to the "1998 Compendium of Animal Rabies Control" published by the National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians, Inc. (The compendium recommends that a pet ferret should be treated in the same fashion as a pet dog or cat and be confined and observed for 10 days. If the ferret remains healthy during that time the ferret can safely be considered to have been incapable of transmitting rabies to the person that was bitten.)

MCL 287.892

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

In order to prove that an animal is rabid, the animal must be killed, beheaded, and an examination of its brain tissue must be performed. There is no other means of proving with any certainty that a particular animal has rabies. This, obviously, is not a particularly welcome test when the animal on which it is performed is a beloved pet. As a result, an alternative method of determining whether an animal could have infected a person with the rabies virus has arisen. This involves quarantining the animal (currently, ten days for dogs and cats) and waiting to see if it develops symptoms. This does not prove that the animal has or does not have rabies, but determines whether or not it could have infected the person who was bitten or scratched.

A quarantine is effective because rabies is a very deadly disease that is transmitted from an infected animal's saliva. It has long been established that, in dogs and cats, there is a very short time period between when an

animal first begins to show symptoms of infection and
the

animal's death. Some of these symptoms are well known to the general public, for example, foaming at the mouth, erratic and sometimes vicious behavior. Although some animals can be infected for some time before they begin to exhibit symptoms, it is well established that they do not pass on or shed the virus until the final stages of the disease which coincide with the display of these well known and easily recognized symptoms. As a result, when a pet dog or cat is suspected of having rabies, rather than killing the animal to have it tested, it is quarantined. If the pet exhibits symptoms associated with rabies during that time period, it is euthanized and tested to make certain that the animal was rabid. If, at the end of the quarantine, the animal is still alive and does not exhibit any of the symptoms associated with rabies, it is assumed that it could not have infected the person who was bitten.

Due to a lack of testing or a lack of acceptance of the testing that had been done, ferrets were and are not necessarily given the opportunity to be quarantined when a person is bitten. However, the results of three years of research on the pathogenesis of North American rabies virus strains recently convinced the National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians, Inc. to change its regulations regarding ferrets and to allow for a 10-day quarantine in bite cases.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:

According to the House Fiscal Agency, the bill would have no fiscal impact. (2-13-98)

ARGUMENTS:

For:

This bill will prevent further tragedies like the one that occurred last year when a pet ferret was killed for rabies testing in spite of having been vaccinated for rabies and in spite of the fact that more than a month had passed after the alleged bite incident without the ferret exhibiting any symptoms of rabies. By incorporating the compendium guidelines for ferrets into state statute, ferrets will be protected from local law enforcement agencies or county health departments interpreting different rules from the CDC guidelines. The compendium is a product of the most recent and thorough scientific studies of the issue of rabies transmission and it provides a clear and simple recommendation on dealing with dogs, cats, and ferrets. Scientific studies have established that there is no good public health reason to kill a pet ferret if has bitten a person. The evidence is strong that ferrets have an even shorter shedding period (about 4.5 days on average) for the rabies virus than dogs. Furthermore, although the Journal of American Veterinary Medicine Association's

rabies surveillance report states that in the United States over 1,000 dogs and over 1,700 cats have been found to have rabies since 1989, it has found only 6 ferrets that had the disease during the same time period.

Generally, people tend to be very attached to their pets and the compendium's recommendation recognizes this by allowing pets to be given the benefit of the doubt when concerns are raised that a pet dog, cat, or ferret might be rabid. Ferrets are legal pets in Michigan and to kill them for rabies testing when a quarantine would be sufficient is cruel, not only to the animal, but for the owners as well.

Against:

The bill is unnecessary; the law already requires that ferrets who have bitten a person be dealt with under the CDC guidelines. It is reasonable to assume that if the guidelines set forth in the compendium published by the National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians are adequate the CDC will adopt them and this change in the law will be unnecessary.

Response:

The change is needed because the CDC may not adopt these guidelines for months. Even then, the older human guidelines, also provided by the CDC, could cause confusion because they would conflict with the compendium's recommendations. In the interim, people's pets would be at risk. The compendium is more thorough than the CDC guidelines, is available now, and stands alone (without the other older and no longer accurate standards that might conflict with its conclusions).

POSITIONS:

The Department of Agriculture supports the bill. (2-13-98)

The Michigan Veterinary Medical Association supports the bill. (2-13-98)

The Great Lakes Ferret Association supports the bill. (2-13-98)

Analyst: W. Flory

■ This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan House staff for use by House members in their deliberations, and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.