

CALIFORNIA

Ferret fanciers rally -- again -- to legalize their outlawed pets

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Trying to legalize ferrets in California is like being a Chicago Cubs fan -- you get used to losing. Nobody is giving up, though. Much like the doomed baseball team, there is something about the outlawed mammal that inspires perseverance and devotion.

This afternoon, at the Radisson Hotel in Brisbane, ferret fans from around the state will get together for the 2006 Legalize Ferrets Revival -- the latest attempt to come up with a winning strategy for these perennial losers.

"I needed to give the ferret community a sense of enthusiasm after many years of defeats and disappointments," said organizer Pat Wright, founder of Ferrets Anonymous.

However, even he admits they don't have universal appeal.

"They're accident-prone," he said. "They get in the dishwasher, they're thrown out in the trash, they escape to the dryer vent, and they're squished in chairs. They're not for everybody."

In the most recent of many legislative setbacks, a bill proposed this year by Assemblyman Paul Koretz, D-West Hollywood, got nowhere. Wright said a statewide poll could be the next step, followed by a ballot initiative.

The problem with ferrets, he said, can be traced to the 1930s.

"They were misclassified by Fish and Game as a wild animal," said Wright, who lives near San Diego. "It's like saying all dogs are wolves. There are black-footed ferrets that belong on the prairie, and there are domestic ferrets that belong in the living room."

Ferrets -- a cross between a weasel and a Slinky toy -- are legal in every state except California and Hawaii. Although Wright estimates there are more in the Golden State than anywhere else in the country, they remain undocumented residents.

"They're a non-native species," said Steve Martarano, a spokesman for the state Department of Fish and Game. "We just don't feel we should have another one out there."

If ferrets were legalized, Martarano said, feral colonies might harm native wildlife.

Biologist Jake Messerli, director of waterfowl and wetland programs at the California Waterfowl Association, agreed.

"We're very concerned that the ferrets might impact our nesting population of waterfowl," he said. "Being a small predator, they'd be a huge detriment."

Asked if ferrets have posed problems in the places where they're legal, Messerli said, "One thing that is unique to California, compared to the other 48 states, is our tremendous diversity in the amount of wildlife and habitat."

Sierra Club spokesman Eric Antebi said, "It's not just a matter of one ferret feeding on one nest. They could take endangered and threatened species on the brink and push them over the edge. It's totally unwise to take the gamble."

Those who know ferrets well say such fears are baseless.

"Domestic ferrets are wimps," said Castro Valley veterinarian Rene Gandolfi. "Every ferret I've ever seen who was inadvertently left outdoors for more than 48 hours was in shock or nailed by the elements. You'll find them in your BarcaLounger rather than in your fields."

Pet ferrets became popular in the 1970s. Gandolfi estimates that he's treated a couple thousand.

"One time a ferret ate the rubber feet off the bottom of the telephone," he said. "Another time a ferret got into a woman's foam hair curlers. We removed two from its belly."

Hayward resident Donna Hazelwood said one of her ferrets loved credit cards -- the fake ones that come with pitches in the mail -- and kept a stash hidden in the house. Another had a shoe fetish.

"I don't ever let them have anything I might need," Hazelwood said.

Gandolfi said ferrets live five to seven years on average and are susceptible to heart disease and cancer. They like to chew, and owners must ferret-proof their homes. California residents also must contend with the possibility of confiscation.

Given all this, why own a ferret?

"They are eternal kittens," Gandolfi said. "They are incredibly playful, they are incredibly energetic."

The threat of seizure keeps many ferret owners underground.

Lynn B., who lives in southern Alameda County, has 10 ferrets and rescues others, transporting them to Nevada. Owning a ferret is a misdemeanor, which makes her a criminal.

She can't understand why. "They make great, great pets," she said. "They're always at 78 rpm instead of 33."

Ferret owners might form a clandestine society, but ferret paraphernalia is sold openly. At PetSmart's Albany store, supplies include litter, treats, chew toys, hammocks, apparel, tents and deodorizing shampoo.

Still, not everyone is willing to live like an outlaw.

Twelve-year-old Collin Tyrrell of Concord wants a ferret so badly that he plans to collect signatures for a potential initiative drive.

"They're a mix between dogs and cats," he said. "You can walk them and you can cuddle with them."

His mother, Lise Tyrrell, said her son already has a golden retriever and two cats but is very upset that he's ferret-less. That's unlikely to change -- unless the law does.

"I'm a single mom," Tyrrell said. "I can't afford to go to jail."

Ferret update

For more information about the conference or other ferret issues, see www.legalizeferrets.org.