

Don't fear our ferrets, legalize 'em, owners say

By Dan Reed
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There are more than 500,000 outlaws living among us in this state -- and that's just the furry, whiskered, pointy-faced ones.

Are these ferrets not among God's little creatures? Do they not deserve the same legal status as puppies, kitties, rats?

That's the mournful plea that continues yearly from ferret devotees, who yet again have failed to persuade the state Legislature to make California like the other 47 continental states -- a place where ferret lovers can keep their weaselly pals legally.

So now they're considering a statewide ballot measure. Ferrets are worthy pets, advocates will tell voters. They'll insist that ferrets are not biting, potentially destructive beasts that can escape, form wild colonies and despoil native flora and fauna, as opponents say.

Every year for the past 21 years, Margaret Wilton-Beliel of San Leandro has been trying to legalize ferrets. "They're like a kitten that never grows up," she said. "They're small, they don't bark, and they don't destroy your furniture by clawing."

And unlike a dog, you don't have to take a ferret for a walk.

Two years ago, the forces for ferret freedom came close. A bill to legalize them went all the way to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, but he vetoed it, reasoning they could escape and harm native wildlife. And this is a guy who actually made a movie with a ferret once, 1990's "Kindergarten Cop."

The latest legislative try came from Assemblyman Paul Koretz, D-West Hollywood, who estimates the number of pet ferrets in the state at 500,000. Nonetheless, his bill died in committee.

"It just didn't make any sense to me that they were illegal," Koretz said. "They're more innocuous than cats, and I say that as a cat lover."

"You never hear about feral ferret colonies, because they can't survive in the wild."

And he said it's unfair to make ferret lovers choose between being lawbreakers and upright but ferret-less citizens.

The animals are long, furry and slender, related to polecats and members of the weasel family. They can stink to high heaven, especially if they're not spayed or neutered. And their vet bills can be very expensive. Ferrets are also prone to cancer.

While it's a misdemeanor to own one -- punishable by up to six months in jail and a \$1,000 fine -- mostly authorities simply confiscate them.

"In my career of 19 years, I have never seen anybody put in jail for a ferret," said Nancy Foley, chief of law enforcement for the State Department of Fish and Game.

But the state agency is still strongly anti-ferret.

Greg Hurner, deputy director of fish and game, said the state tries "to keep out a lot of different exotic species. Because of our mild Mediterranean climate, species have a good chance of survival. And they could have significant impacts on California species."

Pat Wright, a 48-year-old La Mesa resident who runs the Web site Legalizeferrets.org, said that's hogwash.

"They have no data on ferrets," he said by e-mail, "only unfounded concerns."

In any case, Wright thinks it's time to take it to the voters. Today, he's having a meeting of Bay Area ferret freedom fighters in Brisbane, to discuss options, including a ballot measure.

Koretz believes a ballot measure might finally lead to ferret emancipation.

"People that own ferrets are always watching, always uncomfortable," he said. "Hopefully, we pass this measure, and ferret owners will no longer have to live in fear."