



NATIONAL SHERIFFS' ASSOCIATION

February 24, 2026

The Honorable Bruce Westerman
Chairman
House Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Jared Huffman
Ranking Member
House Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Westerman and Ranking Member Huffman,

On behalf of the National Sheriffs' Association (NSA), representing 3,081 sheriffs and over 20,000 public safety professionals including deputies, chiefs of police, and other law enforcement officials across the United States, we write to express our opposition to H.R. 7159, the Protecting Local Zoos Act of 2026.

In 2022, Congress enacted the Big Cat Public Safety Act, landmark legislation that strengthened federal prohibitions on the private ownership and breeding of big cats. From a law enforcement perspective, that law has produced tangible public safety benefits. By curbing the commercial breeding pipeline and reducing the availability of big cats in private hands, it has diminished the number of situations in which untrained individuals house inherently dangerous predators in residential neighborhoods. It has also reduced risky public encounters and roadside exhibition practices that historically placed families, first responders, and the animals themselves in harm's way.

H.R. 7159 threatens to undermine that progress. This legislation will introduce broad exemptions and regulatory gaps that could be exploited by commercial dealers and exhibitors, effectively reopening pathways for the acquisition, breeding, and sale of big cats for private possession. Of particular concern is language that could permit so-called "volunteers" to come into direct contact with big cats, blurring the clear lines established under current law that limit handling to trained animal care and veterinary professionals operating in regulated environments. Expanding access in this manner would increase the likelihood of injuries, escapes, and enforcement complications.

Even limited loopholes can have outsized consequences. Once big cats re-enter the stream of commerce in greater numbers, enforcement challenges increase, oversight becomes more complex, and the burden shifts back to local law enforcement agencies. When an animal escapes, is neglected, or becomes aggressive, it is the local sheriff who must respond, often with little notice and at substantial risk.

For these reasons, the National Sheriffs' Association respectfully urges the Committee to reject H.R. 7159.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris West".

Sheriff Chris West
Canadian County, OK
President
National Sheriffs' Association

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Justin Smith".

Justin Smith
Executive Director, CEO
National Sheriffs' Association