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The Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance (BCSA) is a non-profit organization that works to end the private ownership and commercial exploitation of big cats and other wild cats, while providing expert resources to its sanctuary members aimed at improving the health and welfare of rescued captive wild cats.

March 25, 2022

Chair Torrey Westrom
Senate Agriculture and Rural Development, Finance and Policy Committee
95 University Avenue W.
Minnesota Senate Bldg., Room 3201
St. Paul, MN 55155

Re: Oppose SF 4280/HF 4166 – Exemption to MN Regulated Animal Law

Dear Senator Westrom:

The Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance (BCSA), comprised of reputable sanctuary operators and highly regarded national and international partner organizations, strongly opposes SF 4280/HF 4166 to exempt the Zoological Association of America (ZAA) from current law that restricts the possession of big cats, nonhuman primates, and bears.

The BCSA's 16 sanctuary members care for more than 540 wild cats, as well as other captive wildlife. This includes Minnesota-based The Wildcat Sanctuary. We stand in strong support of our member, who would be directly affected by this bill. The Wildcat Sanctuary has long provided an invaluable service to the state by rescuing and providing a lifelong home for wild cats in need. In doing so, they promote animal welfare and public safety, as well as make important economic contributions to the community.

The BCSA has serious concerns about this bill, as it would weaken current protections and adversely affect the safety of regulated species and the public. Minnesota currently has one of the strongest laws in the country to restrict the possession of dangerous wild animals, which has resulted in a significant decline in dangerous incidents in your state. The proposed bill would open the door for the return of such incidents.

Our position on maintaining the state's current strong protections is shared by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), which released this statement underscoring how the proposed exemption would weaken the current law:

"We believe the current law is appropriate as written. The proposed expansion to exempt facilities accredited by the ZAA will only weaken the protections that the current law provides for the public, for public safety officials, and for tigers. AZA accreditation is the global gold standard for zoological facilities, and we believe that only those who meet the highest standards should be authorized to hold and care for dangerous animals, such as tigers, bears, and primates." (AZA Statement)

ZAA standards are not as stringent as those of the AZA, nor are they strongly implemented and enforced. In fact, the ZAA's lower bar for accreditation has attracted exhibitors who lack high levels of animal care, financial stability, proper staffing, and strict safety standards.

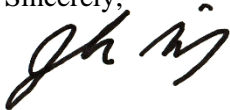
The BCSA is further concerned that this bill would have the consequence of inviting irresponsible exhibitors into the state who know they can meet the ZAA's low standards – putting animals, keepers, and the public at risk. When an animal escape or other incident

does occur, first responders are put in an impossible position. Most enforcement agencies do not have the training or resources to handle incidents involving dangerous wild animals, and they themselves are put in danger.

Finally, there is the question of integrity. The ZAA may say one thing, but their actions speak far more loudly. For example, the ZAA's Public Contact Policy was updated in 2020 to prohibit contact between the public and big cats, bears, and nonhuman primates. Yet, the ZAA is actively opposing the Big Cat Public Safety Act, a federal bill that would end the private possession of big cats and restrict contact between the public and these animals, *even though this federal bill would not affect their members*. In truth, there is nothing to keep the ZAA from reversing course and changing their policy to once again allow unsafe interactions with dangerous animals. They can also choose to ignore violations of the policy by their members. Either way, the ZAA's behavior should raise a red flag.

For these reasons, the BCSA strongly opposes SF 4280/HF 4166. We urge you to vote against this bill and preserve the excellent protections now in place for animals and humans alike.

Sincerely,



John Madigan
Steering Committee Chair
Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance

BCSA Sanctuary Members

Big Cat Rescue
Black Pine Animal Sanctuary
Carolina Tiger Rescue
Cedarhill Animal Sanctuary
Cleveland Amory Black Beauty Ranch
Crown Ridge Tiger Sanctuary
Elmira's Wildlife Sanctuary
Forest Animal Rescue
Keepers of the Wild
Lions, Tigers and Bears
Performing Animal Welfare Society
PrideRock Wildlife Refuge
Safe Haven Wildlife Sanctuary
The Wildcat Sanctuary
Turpentine Creek Wildlife Refuge
WildCat Ridge Sanctuary