



Deprivation and suffering are the hallmarks of roadside zoos.

NEW RULES COMING FOR ROADSIDE ZOOS, TOUGHER PENALTIES FOR ANIMAL CRUELTY

2008-03-11

Canadian Press

Criticized for lagging behind other provinces when it comes to protecting animals, Ontario will introduce legislation to increase penalties for animal abusers and impose strict new rules on the province's 50 roadside zoos - assailed by activists as among the worst in the world.

The legislation, aimed at overhauling a 90-year-old law, is expected to set standards of care for small zoos and give the Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals the right to inspect the operations, The Canadian Press has learned.

The bill, if passed, will also likely ensure there are tougher consequences for people who abuse animals by making it a provincial offence to hurt an animal, sources said.

Ontario's regulation of roadside zoos, when compared to other provinces, has been routinely criticized by animal rights activists.

Newfoundland and Labrador spells out how specific species should be housed and treated, and Alberta recently brought in tougher zoo regulations. In other provinces, the SPCA can go into zoos and inspect the animals.

Sources said Ontario's new legislation will be introduced after the provincial legislature resumes sitting next week.

While some are worried about how the bill might impact rural animal-owners, the plan is being hailed by activists who said the overhaul is long overdue.

"There are some pretty sad cases out there," said Bill Peters, national director of the Canadian Association of Zoos and Aquariums, who made recommendations to the Liberals about the new legislation.

"Their standards are pretty deplorable. Some of the animals are being kept in conditions that you simply don't want to see continue."

Activists charge that Ontario's small zoos are among the worst in the world. Investigators say they have found animals living in filthy conditions, without clean drinking water or adequate stimulation.

Animals that are social and used to living in groups are kept in isolation while other more dangerous animals - like tigers and

campaigns
CAMPAIGNS

lions - are kept in flimsy cages that allow children to stick their hands right in, activists say.

Some Ontario zoos won't have much difficulty upgrading to meet new standards, Peters said. The ones who can't should be shut down, he added. They don't have the facilities or the educated staff to house exotic animals humanely, Peters said.

"They're simply not taking care, in any adequate sense, of the animals that they're responsible for," he said.

Kristin Williams, with the Ontario SPCA, said the Liberals have given the organization cash for a voluntary inspection program but there is nothing the SPCA can do if a zoo refuses to allow an inspection.

"Unfortunately, the current Ontario SPCA Act is woefully inadequate," said Williams, who made recommendations to the Liberals on the new legislation. "It's also very antiquated. The way people feel about their companion animals has evolved."

The province wants to address those concerns and is "interested in giving the Ontario SPCA greater powers to resolve the issues that are suspected with animals in captivity," she added.

The new legislation comes after backbench Liberal David Zimmer introduced a private members' bill to regulate roadside zoos, a bill which died on the order paper when his government prorogued the legislature last year.

Melissa Tkachyk, campaigns officer with the World Society for the Protection of Animals, said she's thrilled the province has finally decided to revamp the 1919 law. It's time the province took a more proactive approach to the protection of animals, she said.

"Of course, we always want to see things happen quicker but there has been a huge break and they haven't got back to the legislature yet so we've got to be patient," she said.

Opposition Leader Bob Runciman is also eagerly awaiting the bill. The Conservative veteran - who has spearheaded bills to increase the penalties for people who abuse cats and dogs - said the devil will be in the small print of the legislation.

The Liberals could run into trouble if they make the law too broad and subjective, allowing it to be applied to rural residents and their farm animals, he said.

"It's a bit of a danger zone," Runciman said. "If it's going to be this broad-brush approach and open to interpretation, there could be a lot of concerns."