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Parrot plan could fly

By KEVIN LANDRIGAN Staff Writer

CONCORD – A House committee proposed a compromise Tuesday to satisfy the Fish and Game Department’s desire to ban the sale of Quaker parrots while permitting owners to keep theirs.

State Rep. Jeanine Notter, R-Merrimack, proposed lifting a ban of more than 20 years on sale of the birds. The ban has only recently been enforced.

The House Fish and Game and Wildlife Committee instead voted, 13-1, to amend the bill (HB 561) to embrace the ban going forward but to grandfather those who own the pets.

“This seems the best way to diffuse the issue. We understand Fish and Game’s concerns, but at the same time, we want to respect the emotional attachment that owners obviously have to these birds,” said Rep. Cliff Newton, R-Rochester.

The amended bill declares these birds, also known as monk parakeets, to be an invasive species.

About two dozen supporters of the bill testified for two hours in favor of lifting the ban.

Nashua breeder Suzanne Burke became the focus of this controversy when she contacted state officials only to learn that a ban had been in place since 1988.

She was told in January to get rid of the 18 birds she owns within 30 days. Burke said she has found out-of-state homes for 10.

Burke said she would rather see a total ban but was most concerned about the 75 or so families who received birds from her.

“I feel responsible for breeding these birds,” Burke said.

Supporters estimate that thousands of these birds live in homes, and there have been no incidents of them causing problems in the wild.

“If you overturn the ban, nothing is going to change,” Notter sad. “They have been sold in the state for years. I have had people calling me crying over the phone that the state is going to take away their pets.”

Rob Johnson with the New Hampshire Farm Bureau said he supports the finding of the Fish and Game biologists that these birds could threaten local crops.

There have been no reports of crop damage from these birds in the U.S., but Johnson said these birds in large flocks have eroded crops in Argentina.

"Heed the results of the experts on this," said Johnson, who is state federation director.

There have been reports of damage to utility lines in Connecticut, where large colonies of these birds have built nests as big as 10 feet wide.

Bird advocates say they are working with utility executives in that state offering labor and volunteer help to construct box nests to relocate these birds.

Allen Fox owns Bird Supply of New Hampshire in Nashua and has sold Quaker parrots for six years.

"They are not going to hurt a person," Fox said. "It's just an argument that I don't think holds any water."

George Messinger of Concord is a certified avian veterinarian and said these birds do not carry disease, are no threat to the public and can't survive in the wild if they escape a home.

"I am here just because this is wrong," Messinger said. "Fish and Game should not be involved in going to peoples' houses and taking their domesticated birds."

State officials say the birds pose a potential threat to native wildlife and they point to problems with large numbers of wild breeding pairs of these birds in Chicago.

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