

California bill that would end orca shows stalls (Update 2)

April 8 2014, by Fenit Nirappil



This Feb. 14, 2013 file photo provided by SeaWorld San Diego shows mother killer whale Katsaka and her calf swimming together at SeaWorld San Diego's Shamu Stadium in San Diego. A California bill that sought to end killer whale shows at SeaWorld in San Diego and phase out their captivity was put on hold Tuesday, April 8, 2014, dousing an escalating fight between animal activists and supporters of the major tourist attraction. The bill's author, Democrat Richard Bloom of Santa Monica, agreed during the bill's first hearing before the water, parks and wildlife committee to revisit his proposal after further study. (AP

Photo/SeaWorld San Diego, Mike Aguilera, File)

A California bill that sought to end killer whale shows at SeaWorld in San Diego and phase out their captivity was put on hold Tuesday, dousing an escalating fight between animal activists and supporters of the major tourist attraction.

The bill's author, Democrat Richard Bloom, agreed during the bill's first hearing before the water, parks and wildlife committee to revisit his proposal after further study. As a result, AB2140 is dead for this year and the soonest lawmakers could vote on the proposal would be mid-2015 following additional hearings.

"It's unfortunate that much of the conversation has been fueled ... by fear and invective and misinformation," Bloom said. "It's clear that many committee members are simply unprepared to make a decision on the bill."

Bloom was inspired by the 2013 documentary "Blackfish" in which filmmakers argue that captivity and mistreatment of orcas make the animals aggressive and has led to attacks on trainers. It examined the events leading to the 2010 death of trainer Dawn Brancheau in SeaWorld Orlando when the whale Tilikum pulled her under water.

The bill would have banned the import, export and breeding of orcas while requiring SeaWorld San Diego to move its 10 killer whales out of tanks and into larger sea pens.

Witnesses for the marine park said that was not a viable option, and lobbyist Scott Wetch told lawmakers the bill would have likely resulted in SeaWorld sending its orcas to parks outside the state.

Public outrage over the movie drove 1.2 million people to sign a petition supporting the bill that was delivered Monday to the Assembly by three elementary school students who successfully stopped an overnight school field trip to SeaWorld.



Assemblyman Richard Bloom, D-Santa Monica, and Dr. Naomi Rose talk about a bill that would set new guidelines for treatment of killer whales in captivity before the Assembly Water, Parks and Wildlife Committee at the Capitol in Sacramento, Calif., on Tuesday, April 8, 2014.(AP Photo/Steve Yeater)

Dozens of animal rights activists packed the hearing room on Tuesday to support the bill, with more who were unable to get seats waiting outside.

SeaWorld dismissed their contention that orcas are too intelligent and too large for captivity.

"That argument is not based on credible peer-reviewed science," John Reilly, president of SeaWorld San Diego Park, said in an interview. "It's based on emotion and a propaganda film."

Reilly said the bill would be detrimental because almost every visit to SeaWorld includes a killer whale show or viewing.

San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce CEO Jerry Sanders said in a statement after the hearing that SeaWorld is important to the local economy because it provides thousands of jobs and attracts millions of visitors.

John Hargrove, a former SeaWorld trainer in Texas and San Diego who appeared in "Blackfish," told lawmakers that orcas appeared agitated and pulled him under water multiple times.

SeaWorld has mounted an aggressive public relations campaign to discredit the film for relying on what it calls unqualified former employees and biased experts.



Sea World San Diego President John Reilly testifies about a bill by Assemblyman Richard Bloom, D-Santa Monica, that would set new guidelines for treatment of killer whales in captivity before the Assembly Water, Parks and Wildlife Committee at the Capitol in Sacramento, Calif., on Tuesday, April 8, 2014.(AP Photo/Steve Yeater)

The publicly traded company bought newspaper ads, set up a website countering "Blackfish," and criticized the film on Twitter. SeaWorld says it expects record revenue in 2013 even after the documentary aired on CNN and at the Sundance Film Festival.

Recent filings, however, showed a dip in attendance at the start of the year that the company attributes to a change in how holidays fall in the calendar year.

Witnesses for SeaWorld said the animals receive the highest level of care and provide opportunities for research to help conserve killer whales in the wild.

Naomi Rose, a marine mammal scientist with the Animal Welfare Institute, a sponsor of the bill, said she was disappointed by the delay but believes the science will ultimately show orcas are ill-suited for captivity.

New York lawmakers have also been considering a bill to ban the captivity of killer whales, although there are none in the state. Rose said she had been working with lawmakers in Texas and Florida, where SeaWorld has parks in San Antonio and Orlando, to introduce similar legislation.

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