

ASSEMBLY BILL NO. 4296

To the General Assembly:

Pursuant to Article V, Section I, Paragraph 14 of the New Jersey Constitution, I herewith return Assembly Bill No. 4296 without my approval.

This bill creates an exemption to State policies and practices that generally prohibit importing wildlife into New Jersey from other states by requiring the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife ("NJDFW") to develop and implement procedures to assist municipalities that wish to import woodchucks for Groundhog Day celebrations. Specifically, the bill would provide a pathway for municipalities, following efforts to relocate a woodchuck from other parts of New Jersey or import one from states in which rabies is not endemic, to import woodchucks from states in which rabies is endemic.

The NJDFW permitting process for possession of wildlife serves the public purposes of preventing the spread of disease among wild and domesticated animals, protecting public health and safety, and ensuring proper treatment of animals. Defending these State interests can pose obstacles to obtaining a permit to import wildlife from outside New Jersey, which may understandably frustrate communities that engage in celebrations traditionally involving wildlife. However, the State must uphold its obligation to protect the people and animals of New Jersey from exposure to diseases, such as new or different strains of rabies found in other states. And the NJDFW must maintain its focus on protecting and managing wildlife, which includes ensuring that animals are not kept under conditions that infringe on their natural behaviors and environment.

While I cannot endorse a policy that creates an exemption to our longstanding prohibition against importing animals from states in which rabies is endemic, I do not believe that this means

municipalities must abandon their annual Groundhog Day traditions. The NJDFW permitting regime allows for interactions between humans and wildlife in certain approvable settings. I encourage the local representatives who advocated for this bill to meet with NJDFW to explore options that suit their needs while avoiding undue risks to the health and safety of the public and the animals. I am confident that all parties involved can work toward creative and flexible solutions that will allow Groundhog Day celebrations to continue for many years to come.

Accordingly, I herewith return Assembly Bill No. 4296 without my approval.

[seal]

Respectfully,
/s/ Philip D. Murphy
Governor

Attest:

/s/ Kate E. McDonnell
Chief Counsel to the Governor