

House ag committee opposes steer-tailing practice initiative

Written by Marianne Goodland, Legislative reporter

The House Agricultural Committee rejected an effort to prohibit “steer-tailing,” the practice in Mexican-style rodeos of dragging a cow by its tail.

HB 1039 was sponsored by Rep. Beth McCann, D-Denver, and arose from publicity last year on a charreada, or Mexican rodeo, in Jefferson County where steer-tailing took place.

The bill outlaws events where the contestants drag a cow by its tail or lassos or ropes the legs of a horse (horse-tripping) for entertainment purposes. A first offense, under HB 1039, would be a first class misdemeanor; a second offense brings more serious penalties. The animal cruelty penalties would be charged both to the participant as well as the promoter, under HB 1039.

Eleven states already ban horse-tripping, including Texas, Nebraska, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Arizona and California. Steer-tailing is banned in Nebraska; in Colorado it is banned at the Adams and Eagle county fairgrounds, at the National Western Stock Show and at the Colorado State Fair.

Steer-tailing, known as a coleadero in a Mexican rodeo, is allowed by the professional association for charreadas, but under specific rules that prevent injuries to the animals; the association told The Denver Post last year’s event was not sanctioned by the association and the promoters didn’t follow the association’s rules.

“I have no intention or interest in interfering with professional rodeo-sanctioned events,” McCann told the committee.

Jefferson County Sheriff Ted Mink testified in support of HB 1039. Animal control personnel in his county attended the July 18 event last summer, he said, and concluded that animal cruelty took place: tails were pulled off that exposed raw nerve endings, the animals suffered broken bones, and the rodeo did not have veterinarians on site.

The event promoters were charged with four counts of misdemeanor animal cruelty.

Mink said the District Attorney had trouble with the current laws on the books surrounding

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animal cruelty due to its lack of specificity regarding the practice. Future events have been suspended at the Jefferson County Fairgrounds, pending the outcome of the legislation, he said.

The animal control manager for Jefferson County, Carla Zinati, testified that 11 steers were injured in the event, with injuries ranging from “degloving” (the exposed nerve endings) to broken bones. McCann later noted the two steers with broken bones were destroyed as a result of the injuries.

Zinati said the Colorado Department of Agriculture issued a “cease and desist” order to the promoter regarding the steer-tailing event, and it was replaced by other rodeo activities.

Rep. Ray Scott, R-Grand Junction, suggested Jefferson County could pass a county ordinance to solve the problem, similar to the actions taken in Adams and Eagle counties. However, Zinati said that as a non-home rule county, they could not do so unless the ordinance conformed to existing state law.

HB 1039 drew strong opposition from the Colorado Farm Bureau, but some of the testimony from the bureau’s lobbyist, outlining their objections, included inaccurate information on a 2008 law.

Brett Boydston testified that farmers and ranchers do not tolerate animal cruelty, and while the bill is well-intended, its specific definitions would have unintended consequences for agricultural production.

Current law allows animal welfare control officers to assess those situations, and Boydston said the specific definitions in HB 1039 would limit the discretion of animal control officers.

“If you put a very narrow definition in the law of body condition of cattle, you may inadvertently affect one industry for the sake of another,” he said.

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And the state legislature is not the best place for such decisions, Boydston said. He noted in 2008 the General Assembly passed a law requiring the Department of Agriculture to set up an animal care advisory board that would deal with the issue but said that had not happened. This issue should be addressed by knowledgeable animal care specialists and “analyzed on the basis of science, not emotion,” Boydston said.

But the bill Boydston referred to, SB 08-201, only deals with confinement of calves raised for veal and pregnant sows; the board Boydston talked about was never included in the bill’s statutory changes.

The bill’s legislative declaration stated the Ag Department should “establish a process to consider questions arising in the future about livestock husbandry and humane livestock production practices.” But since this language was not in the statutory portion of SB 201, it never became part of state law, a point later noted by McCann.

A representative of the eight state chapters for Mexican rodeo told the committee the event should not be banned because of the actions of one promoter. Roy DeRobles said he has been involved in steer-tailing events since he was a child and has never seen an injury to a steer.

In addition, the father-and-son promoters involved in the Jefferson County event are not members of his association and hence the group has no control over them or any way to sanction them.

And a representative of the Mexican American Pro Classic Charrería Organization testified that horse-tripping has been banned in sanctioned charreadas by the national association since 1995.

These events are inherently cruel, McCann told the committee, with the intention resulting in injury to the animals. The promoters intended to run eight such rodeos last year, she said.

“Just the fact that one event alone resulted in these kinds of serious injuries is enough to indicate that these events are not events that we should sanction in Colorado,” and that’s

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recognized in other states. And despite the concerns of the Farm Bureau, “nothing in the bill will impact farm or ranching activities,” she said.

However, the committee didn’t buy it, despite her view the events are “offensive.”

Rep. Marsha Looper, R-Calhan, said she could not support the bill because the process has already worked in Jefferson County, and she could not see a need for it. HB 1039 died on an 8-5 vote.

In other legislative news: John Salazar received a positive recommendation last Wednesday for his confirmation as Commissioner of Agriculture from the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee.

During the Jan. 26 hearing, Sen. Greg Brophy, R-Wray, questioned Salazar about his support for the Northern Integrated Supply Project. Salazar said he has already been on record as supporting NISP, the project that would build two reservoirs in Northern Colorado along the Poudre River.

Brophy later pointed out previous Ag Commissioner John Stulp never endorsed the project and that it was never endorsed by Gov. Bill Ritter.

Building the two reservoirs would provide water storage for municipalities that would negate the need for selling agricultural water and water rights, Brophy said. The full Senate still needs to confirm Salazar’s nomination, but Salazar’s nomination is expected to win easy approval.

Coming up this week: Rep. Jerry Sonnenberg, R-Sterling, is scheduled to present his bill, HB 1005, that would overturn 2010 legislation that temporarily repealed tax exemptions on agricultural compounds, pesticides and bull semen. The bill is assigned to the House Ag Committee, which he chairs.

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