

# A measure called 'Beckham's Bill' would end use of gas chambers at animal shelters

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## ABSTRACT

Marsh, who has previously proposed a bill to require Alabamians spay and neuter their pets, agreed to sponsor the bill, and the two hashed out a bill based on the one in Georgia that banned the use of gas chambers in Georgia animal shelters. The bill was retooled and narrowed, only applying the gassing ban to animal shelters, while allowing wildlife centers, research labs and animal diagnostic labs to continue gassing animals.

## FULL TEXT

March 17--A text message broke the bad news to Sonya Graham late one afternoon last January.

Peaknuckle was dead.

The 7-month-old brindle puppy had been given back to the Cullman County Animal Shelter by his foster family. But the shelter was overcrowded and he got put in the gas chamber, Graham was told.

She couldn't make it before the shelter closed that day. So Graham called a friend who happened to have just left the shelter.

The friend turned back, and found Peaknuckle still alive, sitting in the gas chamber.

Shelter workers pulled him out.

Graham became his foster mother and renamed him Beckham, caring for the skinny mutt for about three months before he was adopted that April by a family in Maine.

That same month, the Alabama Voters for Responsible Animal Legislation began working with state legislators on a bill to ban the use of gas chambers in Alabama animal shelters.

When AVRAL members heard Beckham's story, they took the "beautiful mongrel" that narrowly escaped the fate of so many thousands of Alabama animals and put him at the head of their fight, said Rhonda Parker, the group's founder.

"He's the face of gassing," Parker said.

Beckham's Bill

The bill was put together last April, around the same time Beckham was adopted.

Georgia had recently banned gassing and AVRAL carried that momentum into a conversation with state Sen. Del Marsh, R-Anniston, said Rhonda Parker, head of the organization.

Marsh, who has previously proposed a bill to require Alabamians spay and neuter their pets, agreed to sponsor the bill, and the two hashed out a bill based on the one in Georgia that banned the use of gas chambers in Georgia animal shelters.

The bill – now known as Beckham’s Bill – garnered the support of the Alabama Humane Federation last fall, Parker said. A number of other state groups were brought in and thousands of people signed petitions AVRAL circulated around the state as the bill started to take more definite form. Working with these other groups led to the realization that a 2004 veterinary practices act already established laws on euthanasia, Parker said. The bill was retooled and narrowed, only applying the gassing ban to animal shelters, while allowing wildlife centers, research labs and animal diagnostic labs to continue gassing animals.

This much shorter bill was proposed at the beginning of this month in both the Alabama House and Senate, by Rep. Steve McMillan and Marsh, respectively.

The grassroots effort of AVRAL to spread the word through door-to-door campaigns, phone calls and passing petitions around pet stores, veterinarians’ offices and even church congregations worked. McMillan told Parker he had to stop legislators from signing on as co-sponsors to file the bill.

Gerald Dial, R-Lineville, said he gets an e-mail or two a day thanking him for supporting the bill. Randy Wood, R-Anniston, said he signed on as soon as he learned that gas chambers were used in some shelters.

"Most people don't realize what's going on," he said. "Someone was telling me about it, and I didn't even believe it. I did a little more checking on it and found out they were correct."

No action can be taken on the bill until the legislators return to the session next Tuesday. There are many more pressing issues – namely the budget – that must be handled before taking on this bill, Marsh said. But he asked the head of the Judiciary Committee – where the Senate bill is – to take quick action on the bill.

"I don't think it only has legs, I think it'll pass overwhelmingly," Wood predicted. "It will not be a problem getting out of the House or the Senate -- if we don't get bogged down with something else."

#### How it works

In Colbert County, dogs and cats selected for euthanization are loaded onto a four-section cart and are wheeled into the gas chamber. One large animal fits in each chamber, two medium-sized and up to four small animals, said Tommy Morson, director of Colbert County Animal Control.

Colbert County, Cullman County Animal Control, Florence-Lauderdale Animal Control and Morgan County Animal Control are the four operating gas chambers registered with the state, according to Parker.

Gas chambers become inhumane when run by inhumane people, said Morson, who also serves as president of the Southeast Animal Control Association.

Carts can be overloaded, with up to 20 animals stuffed inside, he said. Big ones fall on little ones and they can

defecate on each other, he said, conjuring an image similar to one described by Parker and AVRAL members.

The gassing process itself is painless, Morson said. Animals are unconscious 20 seconds after the euthanasia technician turns on the carbon monoxide gas. Some animals may "vocalize" before falling unconscious – which Morson attributes to an animal "relaxing" and losing control of its muscles – but he likens the process to a person getting put under at the dentist's office.

"Nobody's ever proved to me, and nobody can, that it's painful and inhumane," said Morson, who's worked in the business since 1983. "I honestly in my heart don't feel like they feel anything."

Gassing also is less stressful than lethal injections on the shelter workers, he argued. The workers load the cart, flip the switch and then go on with their duties, come back in 30 minutes and bag the animals, he said.

"I've talked to people that wanted to commit suicide because they're (euthanizing animals)," Morson said. "I think for the person that's doing the euthanasia that (a gas chamber is) less stressful, and I got to think about the human that's gonna be here 25 years."

Section 34-29-133 of the Alabama Code states, however, that "no animal may be left unattended between the time euthanasia procedures are first begun and the time that death occurs."

Observing the running gas chamber demoralizes shelter workers more than lethal injection, Parker said, citing a study by the American Humane Association and the "vocalizing" Morson referenced.

"It's screaming, yelling, it's panic, and of course ... a caring human doesn't want to be around that," Parker said.

Both sides dispute whether euthanizing animals by lethal injection or by gas chamber is more expensive. Parker cited an American Humane Association study claiming gas chambers cost more than \$4 per animal. Morson said the gas chamber costs closer to 75 cents per animal, compared to about \$2.30 per animal with lethal injection.

Lethal injection is not cheap, said Dr. Jackson Walker, associate veterinarian at the Animal Medical Center in Anniston.

But it is the "ultimate" way to euthanize an animal, he said.

There are variations on the injection, but pentobarbital is the staple drug used in a lethal injection, he explained. The injection overdoses the animal, stopping the brain before the heart and vital organs.

"They actually do go to sleep, so it's an accurate term," Walker said. "Goes to sleep literally in the owner's arms."

But the drug must be injected into a vein, he said. With a big, sick Labrador, that's not an issue. With smaller dogs or some exotic animals, a combination of approaches is used.

Some have an injection of drugs similar to valium prior to the pentobarbital injection, Walker said. That relaxes the animal and puts it to sleep before the pentobarbital is injected.

If an animal is so small that finding a vein is difficult, it's put in a chamber and given isoflurane, an anesthetic used on humans. But gas is never used as the sole means of euthanasia, Walker said. He did not have experience

gassing animals for euthanasia and couldn't speak to the physical affects of carbon monoxide.

"As long as I have access to a solution, I will always use that as opposed to gas," he said.

A new life

Beckham arrived in Maine after a three-day van ride up the East Coast. He hopped out of the van and, tail wagging, licked his new owner's face.

"There was no hesitation on his part," Alison Troxell said of her knee-high 35-pound dog. "Just very warm and loving from the moment he got out of that van."

Troxell still finds it hard to believe that the dog wrestling with her two sons is the face of an animal rights campaign in Alabama -- and that he was nearly one of about 1,000 animals gassed in Colbert County last year.

Overall, Colbert County euthanized about 3,100 animals last year, said Morson, the animal control director. But they did adopt out 1,158 animals too, he said.

Asked to estimate how many animals had to be put down each year, Morson settled on a figure of about 7,000 for northern Alabama -- which speaks to the larger issue.

"If we get the people to do what they're supposed to do, we wouldn't have to do what we're doing," he said. "Spay and neuter."

Star staff writer Jason Bacaj: 256-235-3546.

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