

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

December 9, 1999

Questions About Question 1

In 1996, the voters of Massachusetts approved Question 1, an initiative ballot proposal that had the effect of banning animal trapping in Massachusetts. A campaign that showed cats and dogs caught in snares and suffering cruel torture won the hearts of most urban and many suburban voters. Warnings against the proposal from wildlife professionals and cautionary editorials from such newspapers as the Boston Globe failed to defeat the measure. Since the law has been in effect, some of the concerns have proven to be well-founded.

The town of Longmeadow felt the effects shortly after Question 1 was passed. Beavers were damming the meadowland and threatening to flood a town road. In succeeding years, beavers in rural Central Massachusetts have caused pollution of town water supplies, subjecting residents to orders to boil all water for household use. Residents of the town of Monson have called me for assistance in preserving their properties that are being submerged under beaver ponds.

One elderly widow told of a former cornfield, now flooded, a grove of Christmas trees, now chopped down by beavers, and a vegetable garden that is near the water line. Her hope for relief from the busy animals rests with the state. Massachusetts Highway Department will help address the animals if the water level rises to flood the state road in front of her home.

In the southeastern part of the state, cranberry growers are menaced by another animal that was formerly controlled by trapping. Muskrats burrow in the bogs and their holes, hidden by the water that floods the bogs, are a hazard for workers who must traverse the fields.

The legislature has been hesitant to address the issue of growing beaver and muskrat populations because of Question 1. This year, however, with the beaver population reported to have tripled since 1996 and with the growing evidence of injuries to farm workers from muskrat burrows, the House of Representatives acted on a bill to expand trapping options.

The bill was approved by a vote of 88 to 64. It adds a new trapping option, a trap set under water that kills the animal instantly and humanely. Question 1 mandated the use of a cage trap and subsequent shooting of trapped animals. The bill will be considered by the Senate next year.

I cannot speak for my colleagues, but their reasons were probably similar to mine. These are the reasons I voted for changes to Question 1.

Voters were misled by advertising that showed animals in steel lured trap. Such traps had been against the law in the state for more than a generation, and the new bill maintains that prohibition.

If an animal must be destroyed, it is more humane to trap it with a killing trap than to shoot it after keeping it in a cage for hours or days. The trap is set underwater, so it will not endanger pets.

Traps allowed by Question 1 cannot control the beaver population, as shown by our experience.

If I should ever question the propriety of my vote to alter the referendum decision, I will remember my interview with the Monson constituent who is watching from her dining room windows as the beavers swim even closer to her house. I want to help her turn her new pond back into the front yard.