

Dear

I am writing to ask that the state of Georgia enact legislation to outlaw "rattlesnake roundups." The roundups are annual contests in which hunters bring in as many snakes as they can catch in a year to be butchered, and are responsible for depleting populations of eastern diamondback rattlesnakes in the southeastern United States. This once-common species is now being pushed toward extinction: A study analyzing 50 years of roundup data found that the total number of snakes and the size of individual snakes have declined, and that hunters must travel farther to catch snakes for the event.

Two of these events take place annually in Georgia, in Whigham and Claxton. One of the justifications for the continuation of these killing contests is the generation of community revenue, but other communities that used to hold roundups have successfully changed the focus of their annual event. For example, San Antonio, Florida changed its roundup to a Rattlesnake Festival where there is no collection contest and snakes are not killed. Similarly, the town of Fitzgerald, Georgia replaced its roundup with a Wild Chicken Festival, which organizers say has been an enormous success.

The roundups are environmentally harmful. Snakes are commonly caught by the gassing of gopher tortoise burrows, which is harmful to 350 other wildlife species which use the burrows, including some federally listed species. Last week, an enforcement officer from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources apprehended four men who confessed to having gassed more than 50 tortoise burrows to catch snakes for the Whigham roundup. If roundups are allowed to continue, both the eastern diamondback rattlesnake and the gopher tortoise may require Endangered Species Act protection.

Another justification for roundups is the extraction of venom that is purportedly sold for medical purposes, but producers of rattlesnake antivenin have stated that venom from roundups is unusable and that they do not purchase it. Wildlife education is also a supposed benefit of the roundups, but it is undeniable that the educational value of the roundups would be far greater if snakes were not collected and killed, and the importance of saving native species was emphasized.

The roundups are not necessary to protect the public from the danger of rattlesnake bites. Eastern diamondback rattlesnakes are considered to be a gentle species, and the majority of bites occur when humans try to capture or kill the snake. In the United States, there are six times more annual fatalities from lightning strikes or bee stings than from venomous snake bites.

Under Georgia state law § 27-1-28, venomous snakes are exempted from regulation by the Department of Natural Resources. This law needs to be amended and rattlesnake roundups need to be outlawed to protect gopher tortoises, rattlesnakes, and wild Georgia ecosystems.

Thank you in advance for your consideration and continued support.

Respectfully,