

LEGISLATURE

How effort to prevent E. coli at AZ petting zoos went down the drain

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Key Points

The bill was proposed after dozens were sickened and several children were hospitalized from contact with animals at the State Fair.

Opponents of the bill called it a "knee-jerk" reaction and argued handwashing is a matter of personal responsibility.

Health advocates and families of victims expressed disappointment, stressing the serious health risks of E. coli.

Handwashing to prevent the spread of E. coli proved a step too far for Arizona lawmakers.

Months after an E. coli outbreak at the State Fair sickened dozens of people and left several children hospitalized with a life-threatening condition, a group of senators rejected a law to require handwashing stations at petting zoos in the state.

Members of the Senate Committee on Natural Resources refused to advance the bill, calling it a "knee-jerk" reaction to the illness that can be deadly and saying hand-washing is an issue of personal responsibility.

Sen. Frank Carroll, R-Sun City West, suggested without evidence that children who suffered kidney failure as a result of the infection had some kind of pre-existing condition. Meanwhile, Sen. Janae Shamp, R-Surprise, who is a registered nurse, simply voted "nay."

The committee hearing ended with a 4-4 vote about 20 minutes after it began, leaving supporters surprised and disappointed. A tie vote means a proposal at the Legislature does not advance.

"The evidence clearly shows petting zoos are a high risk," Sen. John Kavanagh, R-Fountain Hills, who sponsored the bill, said. "We know one infected animal could spread it to 100 people."

Health advocate Mary McGonigle-Martin, vice president of a non-profit that first raised alarms about the E. coli outbreak at the State Fair, put it more bluntly.

"I still get frustrated that money and special interests are more important than kids' lives," she said after the hearing. "It's sad they don't think the life of a child is important."

A November investigation by The Arizona Republic [tied E. coli cases to the State Fair](#), with multiple parents reporting their children became sick after coming in contact with a pig at the fair's petting zoo. Dozens were sickened, several with acute kidney failure.

As the number of cases rose in October and November, [the Arizona Department of Health Services did not disclose potential sources](#), the number of cases, the geographic spread or any potential connections. E. coli test results [showed state and county health officials were aware](#) that the Arizona State Fair was the source of the outbreak, even as they withheld details from the public.

State Fair officials confirmed there were no hand-washing stations with soap and running water attached to the petting zoo exhibit, which was located in the fair's agriculture building. There were hand-washing stations and full restrooms inside the building, but hand sanitizer was all that was available at the zoo itself.

Hand sanitizer does not eliminate some strains of E. coli.

Bill sought safeguards for Arizona petting zoos

[Senate Bill 1082](#) sought to require commercial petting zoos restrict access to animals and ensure patrons wash their hands upon leaving. It would have prohibited outside food from being brought into the petting zoo and called for signage warning of risks.

Kavanagh's legislation would, for the first time, have given state health inspectors authority over petting zoos and animal exhibits and the ability to fine operators no more than \$100 per violation.

Calls for legislation came after [a blistering critique](#) by former state health department director Will Humble, who, after the outbreak, said the state had abandoned past safety practices. Humble, who is the executive director of the nonprofit Arizona Public Health Association, called the E. coli outbreak "preventable."

Humble did not speak at the hearing.

A representative of Arizona's \$23 billion agriculture industry challenged the bill.

"I think there is a lot more story behind the E. coli situation that came out of the State Fair," Patrick Bray of the Arizona Farm and Ranch Group said. "I will tell you first-hand experience, if you want to take a tour of the State Fair, we can show you all of the permanent restroom facilities that have hand washes."

He said there were "big flaws" in the legislation.

"We're focused on this petting zoo deal, but you can go into a pound and pet every dog and not worry about washing your hands," he said. "You've got to take personal responsibility as the parents, as ourselves, when you're working with animals. ... It's called using a little common sense."

Petting zoos have high risks for E. Coli

Petting zoos have been sources of outbreaks of an E. coli strain known as STEC, or Shiga toxin-producing E. coli bacteria, which causes vomiting, bloody diarrhea, cramps and dehydration that can lead to kidney failure.

Outbreaks have been traced to fairs, farms and zoos, including one at the San Diego County Fair in 2019, responsible for the death of a two-year-old.

[Bill Marler](#), a food-safety lawyer in Seattle, [has tracked E. coli cases for years](#). "Fairs, petting zoos, and other animal exhibits have been increasingly linked to E. coli," he warned in a fair and petting zoo safety sheet on his website.

Marler represents two Arizona families whose kids were hospitalized in the outbreak.

[E. coli is the shortened name of a bacterium called Escherichia coli](#). It is found in the environment, foods and intestines of people and animals. Some strains of E. coli aren't dangerous, but others can be fatal. It can cause infections, pneumonia and kidney failure.

E. coli typically spreads through contact with contaminated food, but it can be transmitted through people or animals.

Most people infected with E. coli experience diarrhea, severe stomach cramps and vomiting and recover within one week. Children younger than five, older adults and people with weakened immune systems are more likely to develop hemolytic uremic syndrome.

'They are just ignorant of what it can do'

Committee members at the Legislature displayed a fundamental lack of understanding of E. coli, McGonigle-Martin said after the hearing.

"I don't think they grasp how serious STEC is," she said. "They are just ignorant of what it can do. Their logic is not connected to reality."

McGonigle-Martin, who came from California to testify at the hearing, said she worked with [four families in Arizona](#) whose children were hospitalized for days and weeks after contracting E. coli at the fair.

McGonigle-Martin is a retired high school counselor whose seven-year-old son was hospitalized for 56 days in 2006 with an E. coli infection that turned into hemolytic uremic syndrome.

Her organization, Parker's Promise, provides emotional support, medical guidance and education about the dangers of what the group calls "environmental pathogens," of which STEC is one of the worst. It also organizes fundraisers for victims, whose medical costs can run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Sommer Lee of Gilbert, whose daughter was hospitalized for four days with STEC, is among the parents who reached out to Parker's Promise.

Lee told The Republic her 16-year-old daughter stopped to pet a pig inside the zoo enclosure while at the fair on Oct. 26 with her boyfriend. It was the only animal she touched. Her boyfriend, who did not touch the animal, did not get sick.

Jenna Trybus of Phoenix shared a similar account. Her 12-year-old daughter spent nearly three weeks at Phoenix Children's Hospital undergoing two blood transfusions and dialysis after her kidneys shut down.

'We've seen this happen before'

Karen Michael, who attended the hearing, said she was "devastated" by the committee's vote.

"I'd like to say I'm surprised," the Phoenix area resident said. "But we've seen this happen before."

Michael's husband, Cecil, is a retired pediatrician and former chief of medical staff at Banner Thunderbird Medical Center, wrote a letter supporting the legislation. He said the bill created a "reasonable, preventive standard" to protect children.

"I have diagnosed and treated patients with STEC infections and know how deadly these infections are, especially to young children," he wrote.

He said requiring petting zoo visitors to use hand-washing stations is a straightforward public-health measure.

"Handwashing with soap and running water is the most effective, evidence-based intervention to reduce pathogen transmission following animal contact," Michael said.

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