



THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES

February 7, 2019

Representative Brad Witt, Chair
House Committee on Natural Resources
900 Court St. NE
Salem Oregon 97301
Rep.bradwitt@oregonlegislature.gov

RE: OPPOSE Legislation to allow trophy hunting of cougars with hounds

Dear Chairman Witt and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the undersigned organizations, we would like to express our strong opposition for legislation that would weaken or repeal Measure 18, including but not limited to HB 2370 and HB 2795. These bills attempt to allow the use of hounds to hunt cougars for recreation, or “trophy hunting.”¹ Voters have twice opposed the inhumane and unsporting use of hounds to trophy hunt cougars. In 1994, a majority of voters passed Measure 18, and in 1996, an even larger majority of voters overwhelmingly rejected a measure to repeal it. Moreover, **a January 2019 poll by Remington Research Group found that the majority of voters, 65 percent, are opposed to the trophy hunting of Oregon’s iconic cougars.**²

Measure 18 did not ban trophy hunting of cougars in Oregon, but it allowed exemptions to hounding to address threats to property or public safety and to carry out state wildlife management objectives. That exemption has been successful in removing individual cougars involved in conflicts with humans, pets and livestock. In addition to bills that would outright repeal the statute, legislation has been introduced to allow counties to “opt out” of Measure 18, creating a chaotic patchwork approach to wildlife management and law enforcement. These bills set a terrible precedent. If counties are permitted to opt out of Measure 18, they may seek a way out of other voter-approved measures, rendering meaningless the state’s initiative process and damaging Oregon’s democratic institutions.

Oregon’s cougar hunting quotas are too high to be sustainable

- ODFW claims that more than 6,600 cougars reside in Oregon, a scientifically unsupportable estimate.³
- ODFW’s current hunting quota of 970 cougars amounts to nearly 22 percent⁴ of Oregon’s independent-aged cougars, a rate that far exceeds what experts believe is sustainable.⁵
- Oregon ranks fifth highest nationwide for trophy-hunting mortality of cougars.⁶ Between 2008 and 2017, data from ODFW show that trophy hunters killed nearly 2,600 Oregon cougars, but that toll failed to include their orphaned kittens, who also died as a result of starvation, exposure or predation.⁷ They died because trophy hunters killed one or more of their parents.
- Oregon, like other western states, likely has an average density of 2.2 independent-age cougars per 100 square kilometers.⁸ ODFW’s statewide density of five to six cougars of all ages per 100 square kilometers far exceeds this average and is not scientifically credible as the studies cited herein attest, and as cougar biologists have stated in a recent *Associated Press* story.

Erin Ross, of the *Associated Press*, interviewed a handful of well-published cougar biologists as well as ODFW's biologist, in her article, *Are Oregon's cougars being overhunted. Experts Disagree.*⁹ The article illustrates that ODFW is out of step with all other western states and the best available science:

- **Rich Beausoleil, the bear and cougar specialist from Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife**, told Ms. Ross that cougar-density studies in western states have similar metrics, but Oregon was an outlier. He stated: **“Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife’s surveys found adult densities twice that [of Washington’s]...”**
- **Prof. Rob Wielgus, Ph.D., former director of the Large Carnivore Conservation Lab at Washington State University**, said: **“I’ve not seen such high densities anywhere in the world.”**
- **Part of the problem with ODFW’s population estimate: they include kittens, who are unlikely to survive to adulthood.** Cougar biologist **John Laundré, Ph.D.**, told Ms. Ross, **“The fact that they [ODFW] don’t clarify themselves every time [about kitten counting] says that they want people to assume there are 6,600 big cats running around the state.”**

ODFW's faulty methods contradict results from at least eight extensive, long-term research projects conducted in nearby Washington, Montana, and Idaho. These states' research studies also show a sustainable hunting mortality rate of 14 percent per year,¹⁰ not the 30 percent hunting mortality likely happening in Oregon. Prof. Wielgus told us: “All indications are that Oregon is already severely overkilling cougars and that any additional hunting mortality will result in cougar population collapse.”

The above, well-researched *Associated Press* article stands in stark contrast to one appearing in the *Lake County Examiner*. In it, reporter S. Garrett Shaw quotes Jim Akenson, employed by the Oregon Hunters Association. Akenson claims that Oregon is home to 6,400 cougars, 14,000 cougar trophy hunters and with a “harvest” of 250 to 300 cougars per year that the “harvest rate” comes to a mere four percent of the population.¹¹ Prof. Wielgus responded to this claim:

The estimate of 6,400 cougars by Mr. Akenson is 3 times higher than observed anywhere in the world and biologically impossible. The reporter and Mr. Akenson are completely misinformed about cougar biology and should not be regarded as a reliable scientific sources of information.

Hunting cougars neither protects people nor livestock

Associated Press reporter, Erin Ross, writes:

Some scientists found that when cougars are over-hunted, problem encounters with humans and livestock increase. Wielgus, who has left Washington for the Bend area, was one of the first to identify such a link.

“In the 20 years of research I did with WDFW, we conducted the largest study of cougars ever done anywhere. We found that heavy retaliatory killing or preventive killing actually causes increased problems,” he said.

It works like this: Female cougars have smallish overlapping territories that seem to fluctuate with prey abundance. Male cougars have larger, non-overlapping territories

that encompass multiple female ones. Only large, older males are capable of holding down these territories, “and you don’t get to be a 10-year-old male by attacking humans or livestock or pets.”

But Wielgus found that those 10-year-old males were far more likely to be killed by hunters.

“And we found that when you remove an older male, you have two or three teenage males come in to take their place. And those are the ones that are responsible for most bad encounters between cougars and people, as well as the majority of livestock and pet depredations.”¹²

Hunting dangerous prey (e.g., large ungulates) can be fatal to cougars.¹³ Cougar can die from puncture wounds inflicted by ungulates’ antlers or while trying to subdue large prey animals, they can be slammed into trees or branches resulting in injury or death.¹⁴ Because of these dangers, cougars select for prey based upon several factors including their age and body size. Yet, Elbroch et al. (2017) found that some cougars, those with less experience, but suffering from hunger are “those most likely to engage dangerous prey.”¹⁵ Young, dispersing cougars, Elbroch et al. (2017) write, “suffer low social rank in encounters with resident adults, and exhibit greater mortality rates than established adults.”¹⁶

Because of their lack of hunting skills, orphaned kittens or young dispersing animals are the individuals most likely to have negative encounters with humans or livestock.¹⁷ For these reasons, reducing the mortalities of resident adult animals is essential in preventing human conflicts with cougars for two reasons. One: adult cougars kill dispersing young animals, or Two: without persecution, adult cougars can care for their young, and the young are not orphaned before they learn to hunt optimal, but dangerous prey (ungulates).

Livestock losses from cougars are nominal, non-lethal measures reduce them further

Conflicts with cougars are exceptionally rare. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, cougars account for approximately 0.05 percent of cattle mortalities and 0.16 percent of sheep mortalities in Oregon.¹⁸ In fact, 53 times more cattle and sheep die from maladies (e.g., illness, disease, birthing problems, weather, poisoning and theft), than from cougars.¹⁹ Humane solutions, such as installing predator-proof enclosures, penning animals at night, and utilizing frightening devices, are readily available to reduce or entirely prevent potential conflicts between cougars and livestock.

- Keep livestock, especially the most vulnerable—young animals, mothers during birthing seasons and hobby-farm animals—behind barriers such as electric fencing and/or in barns or pens or kennels with a top.²⁰ The type of enclosure needs to be specific for the predator to prevent climbing, digging or jumping.²¹
- In large landscapes, use human herders, range riders and/or guard animals.²² Guard dogs work better when sheep and lambs are contained in a fenced enclosure rather than on open range lands where they can wander unrestrained.²³
- Suspended clothing; LED flashing lights (sold as “Foxlights”); radio alarm boxes set off to make alarm sounds/noises near pastures are some of the low-cost sound and or visual equipment that deters wild cats.²⁴

Finally, Oregonians would benefit from increased education about humanely coexisting with cougars, rather than allowing hounds to be used for increased cougar hunting. ODFW must educate the public,

including pet owners, hikers, and ranchers, on how to avoid conflicts with cougars and other top carnivores.

Killing cougars will not increase deer or elk herd numbers

Killing cougars will not increase deer or elk herds. Because ecological systems are complex, heavily persecuting cougars will fail to address the underlying malnutrition problems that deer face.²⁵ Their populations must stay at a smaller size relative to their prey or they risk starvation themselves.²⁶ Thus, cougars self-regulate.²⁷ When prey populations decline, so do cougar populations.

As vital top carnivores, cougars maintain Oregon's sensitive and highly-valued wild spaces with their behaviors. They prevent starvation and chronic wasting disease among their prey by regulating numbers and taking the sickest and weakest prey.

Why cougars matter

Cougars are highly sentient animals with intrinsic values appreciated by most Americans, and certainly by a majority of Oregonians' voters as the 2019 poll shows (supra).²⁸ Cougars maintain complex social structures.²⁹ A mother will spend up to two years raising her kittens. Cougar kills, a new study shows, provides nourishment for more species than any other top carnivores. They leave food for beetles, bald eagles, black bears and dozens of other species.³⁰ Cougars also increase biological diversity and ecosystem function.³¹

Hounding and trophy hunting cougars is cruel and out of favor

Trophy hunting of cougars with hounds is a voter unpopular, cruel and unsporting practice.³² Using radio-collared trailing hounds to chase cougars and bay them into trees or rock ledges so that trophy hunters can shoot the cat at close range is unethical. Furthermore, hounds kill kittens, and cougars often injure or kill hounds.³³ The practice is exceedingly stressful and energetically taxing to cougars.³⁴ Hounds also chase non-target wildlife and trespass onto private lands.³⁵ Furthermore, research indicates that hound hunting highly disturbs deer, potentially harming deer populations on the whole.³⁶ This disturbance likely affects domestic livestock too, causing stress and reducing their health and reproductive potential.

Conclusion

In summary, efforts to allow hound hunting of cougars is harmful to cougars and hounds, also detrimental to other wildlife and entire ecosystems as well as to the majority of Oregonians who voted to prohibit hound hunting. Our state's cougar population already experiences significant mortality through trophy hunting. The practice is unnecessary and not an effective solution to reduce conflicts. Therefore, we ask you to oppose legislation to weaken or repeal Measure 18. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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Endnotes

¹ The hunting of cougars is done primarily for trophy purposes and is therefore considered “trophy hunting.” The Humane Society of the United States defines trophy hunting as the practice of killing—or pursuing with the intent to kill—wild animals to display their body parts, not primarily for food or subsistence (The Humane Society of the United States. 2017. *State of the Mountain Lion: A Call to End Trophy Hunting of America’s Lion*. Washington, DC).

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⁸ Beausoleil et al; Cooley et al; Robinson and Desimone; Robinson et al; Robinson et al; Wielgus et al.

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¹¹ S. Garrett Shaw, “Cougars See Massive Population Increase” *Lake County Examiner*, Jan. 30, 2019, 2019.

¹² Ross.

¹³ L. M. Elbroch, J. Feltner, and H. B. Quigley, “Stage-Dependent Puma Predation on Dangerous Prey,” *Journal of Zoology* 302, no. 3 (Jul 2017), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/jzo.12442>.

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