

Groups urge lawmakers to reject bill reinstating cougar hunting with dogs

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Legislators, Governor also asked to call for halt to State cougar plan

Salem — A coalition of conservation and animal welfare groups has urged lawmakers to reject legislation that would overturn Measure 18, an initiative approved by voters in 1994 that banned the use of hounds for hunting cougars and bears. The bill, HB 2971, would permit the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) to deputize trophy hunters as government agents and allow the hunters to use hounds to kill cougars. In an April 1 letter to legislators and Governor Ted Kulongoski, a host of national and Oregon-based organizations, including Big Wildlife, Oregon Chapter Sierra Club, The Humane Society of the United States, BARK, and Oregon Natural Desert Association among others, said the proposal would undermine Measure 18. “Legislators should respect the will of voters, who overwhelmingly supported Measure 18. Voters passed the ban not only because they believe hounding is unsportsmanlike but because they support conserving a diversity of wildlife in the state,” the letter said. The organizations also contend the reinstatement of hounding of cougars would adversely impact other wildlife, including endangered species, since dogs sometimes pursue and harass non-target wildlife. Hounds have also been known to chase bears and cougars with young, increasing the risk that cubs could be separated from their mothers. The coalition also said it was concerned the hounding of cougars could increase poaching of wildlife. “In states where hounding of cougars and bears is still permitted, it is not always easy for wildlife officials to distinguish between the legal use of dogs to pursue an animal and illegal use,” the groups wrote. In addition, the organizations said they were deeply troubled by a number of ODFW actions that have steadily rolled back safeguards for cougars. “Over the years, the agency has bent over backwards to accommodate trophy hunters disgruntled with the ban. For example, the agency has reduced cougar tag fees to a paltry \$11.50, extended the cougar hunting season to ten months and in some areas year-round, and permitted hunters to kill two cougars per year. As a result, more cougars are being killed by hunters in Oregon than ever before,” the letter said. The coalition urged officials to halt the ODFW’s cougar plan, which was launched earlier this year. The groups maintain in their April 1 letter that “There is no scientific justification for such an aggressive approach to addressing perceived conflicts with cougars. Nor are cougars a significant threat to public safety. There has never been a verified cougar attack on humans in Oregon and nothing in the CMP would prevent an attack.” They said the ODFW’s admission that the agency had “mistakenly” killed three cougars outside the plan’s target areas was proof that “the Department was incapable of fulfilling its mandate to protect Oregon’s wildlife.”

LETTER TO LAWMAKERS
Dear State Representative: We the undersigned organizations (with over 150,000 members in Oregon) urge lawmakers to intervene immediately to halt the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife’s Cougar Management Plan (CMP). The plan, which was recently launched, calls for expansive use of lethal controls to “manage” cougars in the state. There is no scientific justification for such an aggressive approach to addressing perceived conflicts with cougars. Nor are cougars a significant

threat to public safety. There has never been a verified cougar attack on humans in Oregon and nothing in the CMP would prevent an attack. In addition, Oregonians overwhelmingly oppose the plan. To add insult to injury, the ODFW recently admitted it had erroneously killed three cougars outside one of the plan's target areas, further proof the agency is incapable of fulfilling its mandate to safeguard Oregon's wildlife. Large mammals such as cougars play an integral role maintaining healthy ecosystems by regulating deer and elk, as well as smaller mammal, populations. Given these facts, it is clear the CMP is poor public policy, scientifically indefensible, and inconsistent with basic wildlife management principles. In addition, the agency's continued emphasis on killing cougars will divert resources away from techniques that are far more effective in reducing conflicts, such as appropriate land-use planning, improved animal husbandry, and public education. Rather than killing cougars, the ODFW should be encouraging individuals to take preventative steps, like avoiding feeding wildlife, bringing pets in at night, sheltering domestic farm and ranch animals, installing motion lighting around their property, recreating with others while in cougar country, and educating their families about cougars to reduce conflicts with the wild cats. Furthermore, it is apparent the ODFW has bent over backwards to accommodate trophy hunters disgruntled with the passage of Measure 18, the voter-approved ban on the use of hounds for hunting cougars. For example, the state agency has reduced cougar tag fees to a meager \$11.50, extended the cougar hunting season to ten months and in some areas year-round, and permitted hunters to kill two cougars per year. As a result, more cougars are being killed by hunters in Oregon than ever before. See the attached Mail Tribune article for more details. We also urge you to oppose any legislation that would "deputize" trophy hunters to carry out the CMP. As you may be aware, HB 2971 would roll back Measure 18 by permitting the ODFW to hire trophy hunters with hounds to implement the CMP. We oppose this legislative proposal for a number of reasons: First, legislators should respect the will of voters, who overwhelmingly supported Measure 18. Voters passed the ban not only because they believe hounding is unsportsmanlike but because they support conserving a diversity of wildlife in the state, including top carnivores such as cougars. Second, we remain concerned that the use of hounds for chase and cornering cougars for hunting adversely impacts other wildlife including imperiled species. In the northwest some wildlife species such as the Pacific fisher, American pine marten, and wolverine are in jeopardy. Wildlife agencies throughout the region have acknowledged that hounds may at times pursue and harass non-target wildlife. With that in mind, fisher, marten, and wolverine populations isolated by habitat destruction and fragmentation are extremely vulnerable to any additional stress. In some cases where hounds are still used for hunting cougars and bears, fisher and marten, in particular, have been chased into areas that have been clearcut, exposing them to easy predation. Also, hounds have been known to pursue bears and cougars with young, increasing the risk that cubs could be separated from their mothers. Third, we are also troubled by the use of hounds by poachers. In states where hounding of cougars and bears is still permitted, it is not always easy for wildlife officials to distinguish between the legal use of dogs to pursue an animal and illegal use. Some wildlife officials in the northwest have said allowing dogs in the woods for several months of the year makes it even more difficult to catch poachers. Maintaining the prohibition on hound hunting of cougars will undoubtedly help prevent some illegal killing of wildlife. Again, we urge you to halt the Cougar Management Plan and oppose HB 2971. Thank you. For more information, contact Spencer Lennard with Big Wildlife, POB 489, Williams, Oregon 97544; Phone: 541-941-9242; Email: bigwildlife@gmail.com Sincerely, Spencer Lennard Big Wildlife Williams, Oregon Sally Mackler Oregon Chapter Sierra Club Jacksonville, Oregon Kelly Peterson The Humane Society of the United States Portland, Oregon Sara L. Carlson The Cougar Fund Jackson, Wyoming Greg Dyson Hells Canyon Preservation Council La Grande, Oregon Stephanie Tidwell Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center Ashland, Oregon Alex P. Brown BARK Portland, Oregon Jayne Miller Oregon Cougar Action Team Turner, Oregon Josh Laughlin Cascadia Wildlands Project Eugene, Oregon Nicole Paquette, Esq. Animal Protection Institute Sacramento, California Michael Finkelstein Center for Biological Diversity Tucson, Arizona Jim Ince Umpqua Watersheds Roseburg, Oregon Barksdale Brown Oregon Natural Desert Association Bend, Oregon Karen Coulter Blue Mountains Biodiversity Project Fossil, Oregon Chip Dennerlein Siskiyou Regional Education Project Grants Pass, Oregon Randi Spivak American Lands Alliance Washington, DC Paul Loney Oregon Wildlife Federation Portland, Oregon