

House approves bill to overturn ban on hounding cougars

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

Ranchers, Conservationists Say Legislation Based on "Hysteria"

SALEM, Ore. "A coalition of ranchers, farmers, conservationists, and animal welfare advocates sharply criticized the Oregon House for passing legislation this week that would overturn Measure 18, the 1994 voter-approved ban on the use of hounds for hunting cougars. If signed into law, the House proposal (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.

At a hearing before the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee in April, a contingent of ranchers and farmers testified against the bill, saying it was unnecessary because cougars are not a significant threat to domestic animals or humans. Instead of killing cougars, the ranchers and farmers said the simple, non-lethal steps they employ on their own land can prevent conflicts with the big cats. The coalition urged the state Senate to reject the bill if it comes before lawmakers there later this month. "This legislation has nothing to do with protecting Grandma Myrtle, little children, "Fluffy" the poodle, or sheep from big, bad cougars. Trophy hunters know Oregonians oppose the cruel practice of using a pack of howling, radio collared dogs to chase cougars. So hunters are whipping up hysteria to make an end run around the hounding ban," said Brian Vincent, Communications Director for Big Wildlife. The coalition noted that voters passed Measure 18 not only because they believe hounding is inhumane but because they support conserving a diversity of wildlife in the state. They 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 groups also said they were 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, they said. "This bill is 100% about recreational killing of cougars. It has nothing to do with management or safety. The Oregon House has again turned its back on voters who twice said they wanted cougars protected. Money talks while science and ethics take a back seat," said Spencer Lennard, Director of Big Wildlife. In addition, the coalition said it was 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 hounding 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. And earlier this year, the ODFW launched its Cougar Management Plan that employs aggressive lethal controls of cougars throughout the state. As a result, more cougars are being killed in Oregon than ever before. "As ranchers and farmers, we must find ways to live in balance with our surrounding environment. It is possible to achieve this without repeating the mistakes of a shoot first, ask questions later management program," southern Oregon rancher Michael Moss said.

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