

Rethink cougars' role

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Gov. Ted Kulongoski hasn't had occasion to exercise his veto power during this legislative session, because both the House and the Senate are under the control of his fellow Democrats. But the governor should dig his veto stamp from the back of his desk drawer and use it on House Bill 2971, which would weaken protection for bears and cougars.

Kulongoski would be doing Oregon wildlife a favor, and sparing legislators the embarrassment of circumventing the voters' will.

HB 2971 allows the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to deputize volunteers to hunt cougars with dogs, and to hunt black bears using dogs or bait. Both hunting practices were banned specifically by Measure 18, approved by the voters in 1994. Two years later, voters rejected a proposal to repeal the measure. Efforts to weaken the hunting restrictions, especially for cougars, have arisen in each legislative session since then, and have been unsuccessful until now.

HB 2971 mandates that bears and cougars be hunted in accordance with an ODFW-approved management plan. The agency approved a management plan for cougars last year. Hunting with dogs would become a leading management tool under HB 2971, despite voters' twice-stated wishes.

Management of the cougar population by hunting has never stopped, even after Measure 18. The voter-approved law allows any cougars that present a threat to humans or livestock to be hunted with dogs. And hunting cougars without the aid of dogs has expanded greatly over the past dozen years, so that more of the big cats are being killed today than before.

In 1993, the year before Measure 18 appeared on the ballot, the state recorded 276 complaints about cougars and sold 560 cougar tags to hunters for \$55 apiece. Hunters killed 160 cougars that year, and an additional 27 were killed because they were judged to be a threat to livestock or humans. In 2006, the state received 443

complaints about cougars and sold 38,719 cougar tags to hunters – mostly as \$11.50 add-ons to deer and elk tags. Last year, hunters bagged 284 cougars; another 128 were killed because they threatened people or property.

A paradox is apparent in these figures: The number of complaints about cougars has nearly doubled, despite a steep increase in the number of cougars being killed. A possible explanation is that the state rarely verifies complaints, and has done little to discourage public fears of an exploding cougar population in the wake of Measure 18. But even if every reported cougar sighting were confirmed, it's clear that increased hunting has not led to a reduction in complaints.

The figures also show that Oregon's cougar population is already intensively managed. Cougars that threaten livestock or humans can still be hunted with dogs; last year, the number of such kills nearly approached hunters' total harvest in 1993. Tens of thousands of hunters routinely obtain permission to shoot a cougar if they see one, and although these hunters may not use dogs, their large number permits a low success rate to result in nearly twice as many kills as in the pre-Measure 18 period.

HB 2971 would intensify still further the management of cougars by hunting. The pattern of the recent past suggests that the total number of dead cougars, the number killed because they pose some kind of threat, and the number of complaints all could be expected to increase. Kulongoski should not agree to redouble a failed effort.

Instead, Oregon should look to California, where hunting of cougars effectively has been banned since 1972, except when they pose threats. Cougar management in California includes a recognition that predator populations are self-regulating, and the balance of predators and prey plays an important part in maintaining the health of an ecosystem. Given its population of both humans and cougars, California should have more cougar attacks than any Western state or province. Instead, it ranks No. 11.

The voters meant what they said with Measure 18. A veto of HB 2971 would let the ODFW know that it needs to rethink the role of cougars in Oregon's wild lands.