Here’s one way to tell whether the Oregon Legislature is in session: Bills to weaken, repeal or circumvent the voter-approved ban on hunting cougars with dogs are being debated in Salem. Such bills have become legislative perennials, and this session is no different — several proposals to unleash the hounds have been introduced. Any of them would defy the voters’ will, and each of them represents a flawed response to a problem that is greatly exaggerated — if it exists at all.

Measure 18, passed by voters in 1994, banned the most common and effective method of hunting cougars: Train dogs equipped with radio collars to tree a big cat, then follow the signal to where the trapped cougar can be shot at close range. Two years later, a proposal to repeal Measure 18 was defeated by an even greater margin. The votes expressed an emotional reaction to an unsportsmanlike hunting technique. Nearly two decades of experience show that the voters also grasped the scientific facts of predator behavior and control.

Measure 18 doesn’t ban cougar hunting — it’s still legal to kill the cats, and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife has encouraged the practice by lengthening the cougar hunting season, cutting the price of cougar tags, and bundling them with hunting tags for other game. Hunters killed 217 cougars in Oregon last year, more than in the years before 1994.

Nor does Measure 18 prohibit hunting cougars with dogs in all cases. When a cougar is judged to be a threat to human safety or livestock, the offending animal can be treed by dogs and shot. The rules governing such hunts have been loosened over the years, so that the number of cougars killed as threats has risen while the number of complaints about conflicts with cougars has declined.

Despite what looks like a successful wildlife management policy — Oregon has fewer unsportsmanlike hunts, more hunting opportunities generally and can respond effectively when cougars are spotted near homes or ranches — the Legislature is considering a variety bills that would undermine Measure 18:

House Bill 2337 would create a pilot program for hunting cougars with dogs, and allow counties to opt into the program. The bill would create a patchwork of wildlife management policies in Oregon, with dog hunting allowed in those parts of the state where trophy hunters hold the greatest sway. A second proposal for a dog hunting pilot program is contained in HB 3428.

HB 3326 would allow the use of dogs during the final three months of cougar-hunting season if the state’s harvest quota has not been met. The legislation effectively repeals Measure 18, and bears no relation to human safety or livestock predation. A parallel version of HB 3326 has been introduced in the Senate.

The number of complaints about damage or threats by cougars peaked in 1999 at 1,072. Last year there were 330 such complaints. If the aim of state wildlife management policy is to ensure that cougars create fewer problems for humans, Oregon should keep doing what it’s doing now.
A more aggressive hunting policy actually stands a good chance of increasing the number of complaints. Hunters tend to target the biggest cougars — the dominant males that protect their territory by killing juveniles. These younger cats are the ones that seek new territory, sometimes coming into conflict with humans. More cougar trophies in hunters’ rec rooms would mean more smaller cougars in the suburbs and pastures.

The voters knew what they were doing when they approved Measure 18. If legislators know what they’re doing, they’ll leave the measure alone.

*Story 1 of 10*