

SENATE BILL REPORT

ESHB 2438

As Reported By Senate Committee On:
Natural Resources, Ocean & Recreation, February 28, 2008

Title: An act relating to adding permanency to a pilot project that allowed for the use of dogs in cougar hunting.

Brief Description: Extending a pilot project that allows for the use of dogs to hunt cougars.

Sponsors: House Committee on Agriculture & Natural Resources (originally sponsored by Representatives Kretz, Williams, Blake, McCune, Newhouse, Takko, Chandler, Condotta, Armstrong, Dunn, McDonald, Warnick and Pearson).

Brief History: Passed House: 2/19/08, 66-29.

Committee Activity: Natural Resources, Ocean & Recreation: 2/27/08, 2/28/08 [DP, DNP].

SENATE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES, OCEAN & RECREATION

Majority Report: Do pass.

Signed by Senators Jacobsen, Chair; Hatfield, Vice Chair; Morton, Ranking Minority Member; Hargrove, Stevens and Swecker.

Minority Report: Do not pass.

Signed by Senators Fraser and Rockefeller.

Staff: Karen Epps (786-7424)

Background: In 2004 the Legislature directed the Fish and Wildlife Commission (Commission) to adopt rules that establish both a pursuit season and a kill season for cougars that allow the use of dogs. The seasons are limited to a three-year pilot program located only in Ferry, Stevens, Pend Oreille, Chelan, and Okanogan counties, and may only occur within identified game management areas. The goal of the pilot program is to provide for public safety, property protection, and cougar population assessments.

In establishing the seasons, the Commission was required to cooperate and collaborate with the legislative authorities of the impacted counties. This coordination took the form of local dangerous wildlife task teams that were composed of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) and the local county. The task teams were also directed to develop a more effective and accurate dangerous wildlife reporting system.

In 2007 a fourth year was added onto the pilot project and, for the first time, counties other than the original five were allowed to petition the Commission for inclusion in the pilot

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project. The legislative authority of any county that was not included in the cougar hunting pilot project could request that the Commission include its county in the pilot project if the legislative authority adopted a resolution requesting inclusion; documented the need to participate by identifying the number of cougar interactions within that county; and demonstrated that the existing cougar management tools for that county are insufficient.

Summary of Bill: The pilot project to allow for the hunting of cougars with the aid of hounds is extended for three additional years. The conditions, limitations, and requirements of the original pilot project are retained. The legislative authority of any county may request that the Commission include its county in the pilot project if the legislative authority adopts a resolution requesting inclusion; documents the need to participate by identifying the number of cougar interactions within that county; and demonstrates that the existing cougar management tools for that county are insufficient.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Committee/Commission/Task Force Created: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony on Engrossed Substitute Bill: PRO: This program has made a difference. This pilot program has helped increase the level of comfort of people living and working in the area. This program focuses on protecting private property, livestock, pets, and public safety. Given the results of the pilot program, the use of dogs is important for an effective cougar management program and should be allowed in specific geographic areas. The use of dogs in hunting cougars can be an effective tool for managing the cougar population in some areas of the state. During the first three years of this program, 241 cougars were killed, of which about 64 percent were killed with the aid of dogs. During the same period, the number of human-cougar complaints declined from 119 to 89 in the five-county area, whereas the number of complaints increased from 203 to 286 in the rest of the state. Animals and children have been, and will continue to be, attacked by cougars if the DFW is not given the management tools that it needs to control the cougar population. Cougars are increasingly appearing in urbanized areas where the use of rifles is not safe or possible. Cougars have even been seen near homes and assisted living communities.

CON: Cougars with no known conflicts are being indiscriminately killed. There is nothing in the report that indicates any real need to continue this program. DFW could not establish a direct correlation between hunting cougars with dogs and the decrease in human-cougar conflicts. There is no indication that hunting cougars with dogs has any affect on a cougar's behavior. Hunting cougars with hounds results in only trophy-quality cougars being targeted. This pattern ignores the juvenile member of the species, which are the animals that cause most of the problems. There is no evidence that less cougars leads to less reported human interactions.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Representative Kretz, prime sponsor; Tom Davis, Steve Pozzanghera, Department of Fish and Wildlife; Lee Barker, citizen; Jack Field, Washington Cattlemen's Association; Dan Fazio, Washington Farm Bureau; James Williams, Pierce County Sportsmen's Council, Tacoma Sportsmen's Club, Washington State Big Game

Council; Ed Owens, Hunters Heritage Council, Citizens for Responsible Wildlife Management.

CON: Inga Gibson, Humane Society of the United States; Daniel Wend, Mountain Lion Foundation.