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**Agriculture & Natural Resources  
Committee**

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**SSB 5356**

**Brief Description:** Allowing the use of dogs to hunt cougars.

**Sponsors:** Senate Committee on Natural Resources & Marine Waters (originally sponsored by Senators Morton, Swecker, Ericksen, Schoesler, Delvin, Hatfield and Roach).

**Brief Summary of Substitute Bill**

- Extends for five years the existing pilot project for the hunting of cougars with the aid of dogs.
- Requires a report to the Legislature.

**Hearing Date:** 3/15/11

**Staff:** Jason Callahan (786-7117).

**Background:**

General Conditions for Hunting Cougars With the Aid of Dogs.

Generally, the use of dogs to hunt or pursue cougars is unlawful in Washington. However, there are situations where the Fish and Wildlife Commission (Commission) is authorized to allow the use of dogs to hunt cougars. One such situation is when the Commission determines that there is a public safety need.

The use of dogs to hunt cougars when there is a public safety need must be limited to specific game management units, and may only be allowed after the Commission has determined that there is no practical alternative to the use of dogs. Practical alternatives include seasons for hunting cougars without the aid of dogs, public education, cougar depredation permits, and relocation or euthanasia programs administered by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW).

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The Commission may authorize the use of dogs in public safety cougar removal efforts if the WDFW believes, based on complaints or observation, that 11 interactions occurred between humans and cougars in a given year. Of those 11 confirmed interactions, at least four must have resulted in incidents where livestock or pets were killed or injured by the cougar.

If the necessary interactions occur, and no practical alternatives exist, the WDFW may allow for the use of dogs to take one cougar per 120 square kilometers in rural or undeveloped areas, or one cougar per 430 square kilometers in urban or suburban areas. All public safety cougar removals must occur between December 1 and March 15 in most game management areas.

Cougars may be hunted with modern firearms, bows, or muzzleloaders outside of the public safety cougar removal program; however, the use of dogs is prohibited.

#### Pilot Project for Hunting Cougars With the Aid of Dogs.

In 2004 the Legislature directed the Commission to adopt rules that establish a hunting season for cougars that allows the use of dogs. The seasons were limited to a three-year pilot program located only in Ferry, Stevens, Pend Oreille, Chelan, and Okanogan counties, and were only to occur within identified game management units. The goal of the pilot program was to provide for public safety, property protection, and cougar population assessments.

In establishing the pilot 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 WDFW 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 project. The legislative authority of any county that was not included in the initial cougar hunting pilot project could request the Commission to 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 were insufficient.

In 2008 an additional three years was authorized for the pilot project. The additional seasons were intended to be used for the collection of information necessary to aid the WDFW in formulating a recommendation as to whether a permanent program is warranted and, if so, what constraints should be included in a permanent program.

#### **Summary of Bill:**

The pilot project for the hunting of cougars with the aid of dogs is extended for an additional five years. However, the pilot project is changed to prohibit participants from exchanging payment to commercial enterprises for the use of dogs in any hunts allowed under the pilot project. All counties that participate in the existing pilot program may continue to participate during the additional five year period.

The WDFW must provide a report to the Legislature in 2015 with information regarding how the pilot program has been used to assess cougar population levels and protect public safety and property. The report may also include recommendations for changes in cougar management policies.

**Appropriation:** None.

**Fiscal Note:** Available.

**Effective Date:** The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.