

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 6287

As of January 30, 2014

Title: An act relating to a pilot program for cougar control.

Brief Description: Concerning a pilot program for cougar control.

Sponsors: Senators Dansel and Benton.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Natural Resources & Parks: 1/28/14.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES & PARKS

Staff: Curt Gavigan (786-7437)

Background: General Prohibition on Hunting Certain Wildlife with Dogs. Generally, a person is prohibited from hunting or pursuing specified wildlife, including black bear and cougar, with the aid of dogs. A violation of this prohibition is punishable as a gross misdemeanor.

Several exemptions to this general rule exist and permit the Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) to authorize the use of dogs:

- by a public agency to protect livestock, domestic animals, private property, or public safety;
- to specified entities for scientific purposes, or the protection of threatened or endangered species; and
- for cougar only, in selected areas of a game management unit to address a public safety need presented by one or more cougar where no practical alternative to the use of dogs exists.

Pilot Program for Hunting Cougars with the Aid of Dogs. In 2004 the Legislature established a three-year pilot program that allowed the use of dogs to hunt cougar in select game management units within Ferry, Stevens, Pend Oreille, Chelan, and Okanogan counties. The stated goal of the pilot program was to provide for public safety, property protection, and cougar population assessments.

In 2007 a fourth year was added onto the pilot program, and other counties were allowed to petition the Fish and Wildlife Commission (Commission) for inclusion in the pilot project.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

In order to participate, a county needed to request inclusion and present specified information documenting a need to participate.

In 2008 the Legislature authorized an additional three years for the pilot project. The stated intent of the additional seasons was to allow DFW to gather information necessary to determine whether a permanent program is warranted.

Summary of Bill: A pilot program for hunting cougars with the aid of dogs is re-instituted for a five-year period, ending in 2019. DFW must make recommendations to the Commission, which must establish pursuit and kill seasons by rule. The stated goals of the pilot project are public safety, property protection, and assessment, conservation, and management of cougar populations. The pilot program must be conducted in collaboration with participating counties.

All pursuits or hunts must be: designed to protect public safety or property; reflective of the most current cougar population data; designed to generate data to support the pilot program reporting requirement; and consistent with the results of specified cougar research.

Ferry, Stevens, Pend Oreille, Chelan, Okanogan, and Klickitat counties are specifically included in the pilot program. However, other county legislative authorities may request inclusion by adopting an ordinance and presenting specified information documenting a need to participate.

By September 1, 2018, DFW must provide a report to the Legislature that includes a summary of the pilot program and any recommendations for more effective or efficient cougar management.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on January 24, 2014.

Committee/Commission/Task Force Created: No.

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

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: This bill would reauthorize a pilot program that began in 2004 and ended in 2011. This bill would create a useful tool in combating potential cougar attacks and depredations. There has been an increase in cougar-livestock related issues. With the limitation of the use of hounds as a tool for hunting pursuit and management, there has been an expansion of cougars in the environment. The use of dogs allows for more management options for dealing with cougars. Currently boot hunters are the primary tool in existence.

CON: Citizens voted on an initiative and banned the use of dogs to hunt cougars as a means of management. This bill would breach the integrity of that initiative. Scientific research has determined that increased hunting levels can lead to higher numbers of depredations. Therefore, there is a chance that this new bill would have the opposite of its intended effect. Wildlife viewing is a huge boon to the state's economy, and any removal of cougars could

potentially hurt the state's economy.

OTHER: This issue has been around for a number of years, and cougar management has undergone significant changes over time. The use of dogs for cougar hunting can help manage the sex and age of cougars killed. The main issue is the depredation issue, and DFW believes they have the proper tools in place already. DFW is willing to work with stakeholders to arrive at common ground.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Jack Field, WA Cattlemen's Assn.; Tom Davis, WA Farm Bureau; Tom Echols, Hunters Heritage Council.

CON: Dan Paul, The Humane Society of the United States; Bob McCoy, Bob Aegerter, citizens.

OTHER: Dave Ware, DFW.