

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5940

As Reported by Senate Committee On:
Natural Resources & Parks, February 19, 2015

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: 2/18/15, 2/19/15 [DP, w/oRec].

SENATE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES & PARKS

Majority Report: Do pass.

Signed by Senators Pearson, Chair; Dansel, Vice Chair; Hatfield, Ranking Minority Member; Chase, Hewitt and Warnick.

Minority Report: That it be referred without recommendation.

Signed by Senator McAuliffe.

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.

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.

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. 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 2020. 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, 2019, 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: 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: PRO: The previous pilot program was successful, and the state's current cougar strategy is missing this management option. The livestock industry faces financial impacts from cougar predation, and this pilot would provide another tool in the toolbox. Cougars also have impacts on the ungulate population.

CON: The 1996 initiative banned the use of dogs to hunt cougars. The extension of the seven-year pilot program is unnecessary. Public safety cougar removals are allowed and occur under current law.

OTHER: There is no conclusive evidence that the pilot program is effective, but DFW does not oppose the use of dogs as it can help promote social tolerance.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Wes McCart, Stevens County; Jack Field, WA Cattlemen's Assn; Niel Kayser, Kieth Kreps, Harry Miller, WA Cattlemen's Assn., Klickitat County Livestock Growers; Tom Echols, Hunters Heritage Council; Tom Davis, WA Farm Bureau; Duane Dewey, citizen.

CON: Jennifer Hillman, Humane Society of the United States.

OTHER: Donny Martorello, DFW.