
**Agriculture & Natural Resources
Committee**

HB 1124

Brief Description: Establishing seasons for hunting cougars with the aid of dogs.

Sponsors: Representatives Blake, Kretz, Chandler, Taylor, Armstrong, Hinkle, Shea, McCune and Condotta.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Directs the Fish and Wildlife Commission to adopt rules establishing seasons for hunting cougars with the aid of dogs.

Hearing Date: 1/18/11

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 [RCW 77.15.245].

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 [RCW 77.15.245]. 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 Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) [WAC 232-12-243].

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.

The Commission may authorize the use of dogs in public safety cougar removal efforts if 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 [WAC 232-12-243].

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 [WAC 232-12-243].

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 [WAC 232-12-243].

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 [Chapter 264, Laws of 2004].

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 [Chapter 178, Laws of 2007].

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 [Chapter 8, Laws of 2008].

Summary of Bill:

The Commission is directed to establish seasons for hunting cougars with the aid of dogs. The rules adopted by the Commission are required to ensure viable cougar population levels, be reflective of the best available science pertaining to cougar management and conservation, and be developed in collaboration with a broad representation of stakeholders.

In addition, any cougar hunting rules adopted by the Commission must be limited to game management units where the department has determined that the use of dogs is necessary to conserve and manage cougar populations, protect public safety and private property, or address a localized concern that a cougar population has exceeded a community's tolerance.

The Commission must adopt initial rules by September 30, 2011.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

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