

HOUSE BILL REPORT

SSB 5356

As Reported by House Committee On:
Agriculture & Natural Resources

Title: An act relating to allowing the use of dogs to hunt cougars.

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 History:

Committee Activity:

Agriculture & Natural Resources: 3/15/11, 3/22/11 [DP].

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.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE & NATURAL RESOURCES

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 7 members: Representatives Blake, Chair; Chandler, Ranking Minority Member; Wilcox, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Buys, Hinkle, Kretz and Orcutt.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 6 members: Representatives Stanford, Vice Chair; Dunshee, Lytton, Pettigrew, Rolfes and Van De Wege.

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

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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).

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.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) This is an emotional issue on all sides, but the existing pilot program balances various public values and perspectives and is a good step towards balancing the needs of cougars and people. Although there is divided support for cougar hunting, there is strong support for local options.

Science justifies the five-year extension to the pilot program. There have been fewer confirmed cougar complaints since the pilot program began. Hound hunting allows for more selective harvests and can further the goals of predetermining how many males and how many females are taken. Hounds allow for specific management objectives to be met; hound hunting is not done for sport.

(Opposed) A large percentage of voters supported the ban on hound hunting, and in the time since the vote, the support for predator hunting has declined further. The values of the citizens should be respected, and if there is a change, the burden of proof should be on the proponents of deviating from the voter's will. The initiative did not call for an end to hound hunting only in certain counties or call for further research.

There is no science to support the idea that there is a need for hound hunting, and management should be driven by science and not politics. Science does show that cougar

populations are dropping. All cougars are not problematic, but orphan males can be. Hunting only creates more orphan males and destabilizes population structures. If there is to be more cougar hunting, blind peer-reviewed science should be published stating the need first.

Good wildlife management requires elements not included in the hound hunting program. Cougars can be a safety issue, but the WDFW already has tools to address those issues.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Senator Morton, prime sponsor; Jack Field, Washington Cattlemen's Association; Dave Ware and Donny Martorello, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife; Heather Hansen, Cattle Producers of Washington; and John Stuhlmiller, Washington Farm Bureau.

(Opposed) Bob McCoy; Seth Cool, Conservation Northwest; Bob Aegerter; and Sylvia Moss and Kevin Mack, PAWS.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.