

HOUSE BILL REPORT

SSB 5001

As Reported By House Committee On:
Natural Resources

Title: An act relating to hunting cougar.

Brief Description: Authorizing hunting of cougar with the aid of dogs.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Natural Resources, Parks & Recreation (originally sponsored by Senators Morton, Deccio, Honeyford, T. Sheldon, Swecker, Hargrove, Rossi, Hochstatter, Oke and Rasmussen).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Natural Resources: 3/31/99, 4/2/99 [DPA].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill
(As Amended by House Committee)

- Requires that the Fish and Wildlife Commission use dogs in hunting cougar only to address a specific population or public safety need, and only within selected areas in a game management unit.
- Requires that before the Fish and Wildlife Commission exercise such authority a determination has been made that no practical alternative to the use of dogs exists, and only after the commission has adopted rules for the use of dogs
- Expands the director of the Department of Fish and Wildlife's authority to use dogs to remove or kill wildlife that is destroying property, or when it is necessary for management or research.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

Majority Report: Do pass as amended. Signed by 9 members: Representatives Buck, Republican Co-Chair; Anderson, Democratic Vice Chair; Sump, Republican Vice Chair; G. Chandler; Clements; Doumit; Eickmeyer; Ericksen and Pennington.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 3 members: Representatives Regala, Democratic Co-Chair; Rockefeller and Stensen.

Staff: Josh Weiss (786-7129).

Background:

Prior to 1996 the Department of Fish and Wildlife allowed hunters to use dogs in hunting cougar. The department regulated this activity through administrative rule, under its authority to implement reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions on hunting activities. These regulations included limitations on the use of dogs.

In the general election of November 5, 1996, 63 percent of the voters in the state of Washington approved Initiative 655, which banned the use of bait to attract black bears and the use of hounds to hunt bear, cougar, bobcat, or lynx. These provisions became effective December 5, 1996, and were codified at RCW 77.16.360.

Several other western states including Oregon, Colorado, and California have either banned or heavily regulate the use of dogs to hunt cougar.

Summary of Amended Bill:

The bill amends the existing state statute which prohibits the use of dogs to hunt cougar. The Fish and Wildlife Commission is allowed to authorize the use of dogs within selected areas of game management units to address a specific cougar population or public safety need. Before taking such actions, the commission must make a determination that no other practical alternative to the use of dogs exists. In addition, the commission is required to adopt rules describing the conditions in which dogs may be used. Such conditions include confirmed cougar human safety incidents, confirmed cougar livestock and pet depredations, and the number of cougar capture attempts and relocations.

The bill expands the director of the Department of Fish and Wildlife's existing authority to remove or kill wildlife that is destroying property, or that must be removed for management or research reasons. In these situations, the director may utilize dogs in removing or killing cougars.

The bill does not take effect until it is approved by the voters at the next general election.

Amended Bill Compared to Substitute Bill: The amended bill struck the language of the substitute bill which would have repealed Initiative 655 as it applied to cougars. Under the amended bill, dogs may be used to hunt cougars under specific and limited situations. The amended bill removed the emergency clause and provided a referendum clause.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

Effective Date of Amended Bill: The bill does not take effect until it is approved by the voters at the next general election.

Testimony For: This bill only changes one word in existing law. This would require the department to provide information to people on how to protect themselves. The Selkirk School District can't allow kids to play in the playground during the day, and had to request a patrol officer. These cats can grow up to 185 pounds. I am not advocating that the entire species be wiped out. The taxpayers shouldn't have to pay the bill for controlling these animals. The compromise bill that this committee put together was a good bill. Hound hunters love their dogs. This is not a bad practice and is the most effective means to control these animals.

Testimony Against: This law passed with a huge majority. What evidence is there that the voters were wrong? This is really about hunting in a cruel and inhumane manner. This is a cruel and barbaric way of hunting. There is no testimony indicating that there is a real public safety issue here.

PAWS opposes any legislation that will materially change Initiative 655. The department of Fish and Wildlife needs funding to make the initiative work. Passing this legislation will be an end-run around the people. This bill doesn't just address one word in the bill, it addresses one-half of the initiative. PAWS supports funding the department so that they can do their jobs.

The real threat is the precedent that will be set if the initiative is overturned. The people were not confused about the initiative. Hunting fatalities are more common than cougar attacks. Being residents of Twisp, we have had more bad experiences with hound hunters than cougar sightings. This bill is a major policy change, not just a one-word change. The idea of bringing the issue to a ballot is a good idea. We all want children to be safe.

Testified: (In support) Senator Morton, prime sponsor; and Steve Heater and Jim King, citizens.

(Opposed) Ben White, Jim Reynolds, Jim Robertson, Carla Robertson, and Joe Haptis, citizens; and Will Anderson, Progressive Animal Welfare Society.

(Neutral) Bruce Bjork and Steve Pozzanghera, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.