

HOUSE BILL REPORT

SSB 6118

As Passed House - Amended:

March 4, 2004

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

Brief Description: Creating a cougar control pilot program.

Sponsors: By Senate Committee on Parks, Fish & Wildlife (originally sponsored by Senators Morton, Stevens, Deccio, Mulliken, Roach and Swecker).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Fisheries, Ecology & Parks: 2/26/04, 2/27/04 [DPA].

Floor Activity:

Passed House - Amended: 3/4/04, 90-5.

<p style="text-align: center;">Brief Summary of Substitute Bill (As Amended by House)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">· Directs the Fish and Wildlife Commission to establish a three-year pilot program in certain counties that allows for the hunting of cougars with dogs.
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HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FISHERIES, ECOLOGY & PARKS

Majority Report: Do pass as amended. Signed by 8 members: Representatives Cooper, Chair; Sump, Ranking Minority Member; Hinkle, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Buck, Hatfield, O'Brien, Pearson and D. Simpson.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 1 member: Representative Upthegrove, Vice Chair.

Staff: Jason Callahan (786-7117).

Background:

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.

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 a public safety cougar removal effort if the WDFW believes, based on complaints or observation, that 11 interactions occurred between humans and cougars in a given year. Of those eleven confirmed interactions, at least four must have resulted in incidents where livestock or pets were killed or injured by the cougar.

If the necessary number of 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.

Summary of Amended Bill:

The Commission is directed to adopt rules that establish a pursuit season and a kill for cougars that allows the use of dogs. The seasons must initially be limited to a three-year pilot program located only in Ferry, Stevens, Pend Oreille, Chelan, and Okanogan counties, and may only occur within identified game management agencies. Other counties can request inclusion in the pilot program if they can demonstrate that a need exists, and that current wildlife management tools are ineffective in protecting the county. All rules adopted for the pilot program must ensure that cougars are only hunted to protect public safety or property, are based on the most current population data, and are consistent with a report on cougar populations being prepared by the Washington State University.

Prior to the establishment of the seasons, the WDFW must cooperate and collaborate with the legislative authorities of the impacted counties to develop recommendations for the Commission to consider. This coordination will take the form local dangerous wildlife task teams that are composed of the WDFW and the local county. The task teams also are directed to develop, among other things, a more effective and accurate dangerous wildlife reporting system. In addition, the WDFW must develop recommendations for a

new and modern cougar management system.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

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

Testimony For: Cougars are a concern statewide, but they are posing particular problems in eastern Washington. The populations are out of balance. Cougars are coming into areas that have been populated with people for generations, and killing pets and stalking and attacking people. It is just a matter of time until someone is killed by a cougar. The population of cougars are on the rise. There are currently as many as 2,000 cougars in the state, each needing 100 square miles for a range. This is also causing a problem with their predation on elk that is being relocated into the state. The news media does not often cover incidents in rural Washington, but they do occur frequently.

Officials in the effected counties have agreed with the WDFW that a pilot program would be the best approach. These counties have the most reported cougar sightings and incidents, and are where the staff of the WDFW spends a majority of their time dealing with cougars. If a pilot is to work, it would have to be in these counties. Although the pilot would kill some cougars, the goal would be research and the protection of public safety. The information that is collected would be needed to develop a new population control model. Counties want to work with the WDFW to develop rules that are appropriate for the local area, and help devise new reporting systems that will be more responsive.

Adapting livestock operations to protect against cougars can be very expensive. Not having cougars in Washington would be undesirable, but the populations need to be managed.

The WDFW is doing the best that they can with the tools available, but it is not enough. If the Legislature cannot come up with a solution, the counties will have to do so themselves.

Testimony Against: This issue is contentious and divisive. The WDFW has an effective program, and has the authority to expand the program in existing law should it be necessary. The bill does nothing to improve public safety or aid in research. Other efforts, including education, would be far more effective. Wildlife management should be based on science and research, and this bill ignores that fact. Cougars exist statewide, not in limited counties.

Persons Testifying: (In Support) Mike Blankenship, Ferry County Commissioner; Mary Lou Peterson, Okanogan County Commissioner; Bruce Bjork and Steve Pozzanghera, WA Department of Fish and Wildlife; Joel Kretz, Okanogan Farm Burea; Dan Fazio, Farm Burea; Ed Owens, Hunter Heritage Council and Citizens for Responsible Wildlife Management; and Paul Parker, Washington State Association of Counties.

(Opposed) Carey Morris, Humane Society of the United States.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.