

February 7, 2025

Senator Jeff Golden, Chair
Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Wildfire
900 Court St. NE
Salem Oregon 97301

RE: SB 769 Opposition

Dear Chair Jeff Golden and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the undersigned organizations and individuals, we would like to express our strong opposition to SB 769, legislation that would allow counties to “opt out” of Measure 18, creating a chaotic patchwork approach to wildlife management and law enforcement.

Voters have twice opposed the inhumane and unsporting use of hounds to trophy hunt cougars. In 1994, a majority of voters passed Measure 18, and in 1996, an even larger majority of voters across Oregon overwhelmingly rejected a measure to repeal it. Moreover, **a 2019 poll by Remington Research Group found that the majority of voters, 65 percent, are opposed to the trophy hunting of Oregon’s cougars.**¹

Measure 18 did not ban trophy hunting of cougars in Oregon, and while it prohibited hound hunting of cougars it also created exemptions to address threats to property or public safety and to carry out state wildlife management objectives. That exemption has been successful in removing individual cougars involved in conflicts with humans, pets and livestock. Allowing counties to opt out of Measure 18—a voter-approved initiative that protected cougars from hound hunting **for more than 30 years**—would set a terrible precedent for statewide wildlife management, and all other voter initiatives.

Killing too many cougars *increases* conflicts with livestock

- Cougars are territorial, with resident adults defending their territories from younger, dispersing animals. When too many resident adult cougars are killed, conflicts with livestock increase as dispersing young, inexperienced animals look for easier food sources. Areas with frequent cougar-livestock conflict should focus on non-lethal predator deterrence strategies, as killing more cougars is likely to exacerbate the problem.²
- Because of their lack of hunting skills, orphaned kittens or young dispersing animals are the individuals most likely to have negative encounters with humans or livestock.³ For these reasons, **reducing the mortalities of resident adult animals is essential in preventing human conflicts with cougars** for two reasons. One: adult cougars kill dispersing young animals, and Two: without persecution, adult cougars can care for their young, and the young are not orphaned before they learn to hunt optimal prey (ungulates).

Livestock losses from cougars are nominal, non-lethal measures reduce them further

Conflicts with cougars are exceptionally rare. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, cougars account for approximately 0.05% of cattle mortalities and 0.16% of sheep mortalities in Oregon.⁴ In fact, 53 times more cattle and sheep die from maladies (e.g., illness, disease, birthing problems, weather, poisoning and theft) than from cougars.⁵ Humane solutions, such as installing predator-proof

enclosures, penning animals at night, and utilizing frightening devices, are readily available to reduce or entirely prevent potential conflicts between cougars and livestock.

- Livestock, especially the most vulnerable—young animals, mothers during birthing seasons and hobby-farm animals—can be kept behind barriers such as electric fencing and/or in barns or pens or kennels with a top.⁶ The type of enclosure needs to be specific for the predator to prevent climbing, digging or jumping.⁷
- In large landscapes, human herders, range riders and/or guard animals can be used.⁸ Guard dogs work better when sheep and lambs are contained in a fenced enclosure rather than on open range lands where they can wander unrestrained.⁹
- Suspended clothing (i.e. hanging up shirts worn by livestock producers in different areas); LED flashing lights (sold as “Foxlights”); radio alarm boxes set off to make alarm sounds/noises near pastures are some of the low-cost solutions that deters wild cats.¹⁰
- In a study of cattle and leopards, authors found that using studded leather collars on cattle prevented all attacks.¹¹ (Leopards are about the same body size and have similar characteristics as cougars.)

Finally, Oregonians would benefit from increased education about humanely coexisting with cougars, rather than allowing hounds to be used for increased cougar hunting. ODFW must educate the public, including landowners, pet owners, hikers, and ranchers, on how to avoid conflicts with cougars and other top carnivores.

Oregon’s cougar hunting quotas are already too high to be sustainable

- ODFW’s cougar quotas authorize hunting levels that exceed what experts consider a sustainable offtake rate, threatening the stability of the species’ population. Research demonstrates that trophy hunting must not exceed 14% of the adult and subadult population to ensure stability.¹² Accepting the 3,300 adult and subadult cougar estimate provided by ODFW, the current quota of 970 cougars makes 30% of the population, far above acceptable limits.¹³ Cougars can be legally hunted year-round in Oregon, including during peak birthing season, whereas Washington state’s cougar season is seven months to reduce the risk of orphaning kittens.
- Between 2011 and 2021, data from ODFW show that trophy hunters killed more than 4,600 Oregon cougars, but that toll failed to include the mortality of orphaned kittens from exposure, starvation, or predation due to a lack of maternal care. Additionally, kittens may be at increased risk of infanticide from incoming males, after resident males that offered protection are killed, leaving empty territories.¹⁴
- ODFW’s current model significantly overestimates the cougar population at over 6,400 cougars, an estimate that diverges from all available cougar science.¹⁵ Of this incredibly large estimate, 3,300 cougars are expected to be adults.¹⁶
- Oregon, like other western states, likely has an average density of 2.2 independent-age cougars per 100 square kilometers.¹⁷ ODFW’s statewide density estimates have fallen between 0.9 to 6.2 adult cougars per 100 square kilometers,¹⁸ far exceeding average cougar densities found in existing literature and disagree with leading biologists.¹⁹ There is added ambiguity in the modeled population estimate provided by ODFW, as it is a single number as opposed to a range

derived from estimating the population using lowest known densities and the highest observed densities.

Erin Ross, of the Associated Press, interviewed a handful of well-published cougar biologists as well as ODFW's biologist, in her article, ***Are Oregon's cougars being overhunted? Experts Disagree.***²⁰ The article illustrates that ODFW is out of step with all other western states and the best available science:

- **Rich Beausoleil, the bear and cougar specialist from Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife**, told Ms. Ross that cougar-density studies in western states have similar metrics, but Oregon was an outlier. He stated: **"Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's surveys found adult densities twice that [of Washington's]..."**
- **Prof. Rob Wielgus, Ph.D., former director of the Large Carnivore Conservation Lab at Washington State University**, said: **"I've not seen such high densities anywhere in the world."**
- **Part of the problem with ODFW's population estimate: they include kittens, who are unlikely to survive to adulthood.** Cougar biologist **John Landré, Ph.D.**, told Ms. Ross, **"The fact that they [ODFW] don't clarify themselves every time [about kitten counting] says that they want people to assume there are 6,600 big cats running around the state."**

ODFW's faulty methods—including unpublished reports, and studies that have not passed peer review—contradict results from at least eight extensive, long-term research projects conducted in nearby Washington, Montana, and Idaho. These states' research studies also show a sustainable hunting mortality rate of 14% per year,²¹ not the 30% hunting mortality likely happening in Oregon.

Cougars face many challenges in obtaining their prey. Hunting dangerous prey like large ungulates can be fatal to cougars.²² Cougar can die from puncture wounds inflicted by ungulates' antlers or while trying to subdue large prey animals, and they can be slammed into trees or branches resulting in injury or death.²³ Because of these dangers, cougars select for prey based upon several factors including their age and body size. Yet, Elbroch et al. (2017) found that some cougars, those with less experience, but suffering from hunger are "those most likely to engage dangerous prey."²⁴ Young, dispersing cougars, Elbroch et al. (2017) write, "suffer low social rank in encounters with resident adults, and exhibit greater mortality rates than established adults."²⁵

Killing cougars will not increase deer or elk herd numbers

Though it may seem counterintuitive, research tells us that killing cougars will likely not increase deer or elk herds. Because ecological systems are complex, heavily persecuting cougars fails to address the underlying malnutrition problems that deer face.²⁶ Their populations must stay at a smaller size relative to their prey or they risk starvation themselves.²⁷ Thus, cougars self-regulate.²⁸ When prey populations decline, so do cougar populations.

As vital top carnivores, cougars maintain Oregon's sensitive and highly valued wild spaces with their behaviors. They prevent starvation and chronic wasting disease among their prey by regulating numbers and taking the sickest and weakest prey.

Why cougars matter

There are compelling moral and scientific arguments for protecting cougars. Cougars have their own intrinsic value, according to a moral perspective that is shared by most Americans, and certainly by a majority of Oregonians' voters, as the 2019 poll shows.²⁹ Cougars maintain complex social structures.³⁰ A mother will spend up to two years raising her kittens. Cougar kills, a new study shows, provides nourishment for more species than any other top carnivores. They leave food for beetles, bald eagles, black bears and dozens of other species.³¹ Cougars also increase biological diversity and ecosystem function.³²

Hounding and trophy hunting cougars is cruel and out of favor

Trophy hunting of cougars with hounds is an unpopular, cruel and unsporting practice.³³ Using radio-collared trailing hounds to chase cougars and bay them into trees or rock ledges so that trophy hunters can shoot the cat at close range is, according to many Oregonians, unethical. Hounds can also kill kittens, and cougars often injure or kill hounds.³⁴ The practice is exceedingly stressful and energetically taxing to cougars.³⁵ Hounds also chase non-target wildlife and trespass onto private lands.³⁶ Furthermore, research indicates that hound hunting highly disturbs deer, potentially harming deer populations on the whole.³⁷ This disturbance likely affects domestic livestock too, causing stress and reducing their health and reproductive potential.

Conclusion

Efforts to allow hound hunting of cougars are harmful to cougars (and often to hounds) and are also detrimental to other wildlife and entire ecosystems. The majority of Oregonians voted to prohibit hound hunting, with good reason. Our state's cougar population already experiences significant mortality through trophy hunting. The practice is unnecessary and not an effective solution to reduce conflicts, and in fact is likely to increase conflicts.

Therefore, we ask you to oppose legislation to weaken or repeal Measure 18. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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Endnotes

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