

I am writing today to voice my opinion, backed with factual information, in regards to SB 769, the issue of reinstating the use of dogs in cougar hunting in Oregon.

Oregon is home to a growing population of cougars, also known as mountain lions, which play a crucial role in the state's ecosystem. However, due to the ban on using dogs for cougar hunting, enacted by Ballot Measure 18 in 1994, the state has faced increasing challenges in managing cougar populations effectively. The prohibition has led to rising human-wildlife conflicts, livestock depredation, and ecological imbalances. Reinstating the use of trained hunting dogs for cougar management would provide Oregon with a more effective, ethical, and science-based solution to controlling these predators. This testimony will explore the history of cougar management in Oregon, the consequences of the current ban, the benefits of using dogs in cougar hunting, and how this method aligns with ethical conservation and wildlife management principles.

The History of Cougar Hunting and Measure 18

Before 1994, Oregon allowed the use of dogs for cougar hunting, a practice that enabled selective and effective population control. Trained hounds could track, tree, and hold a cougar in place, allowing hunters to assess the animal before deciding whether to harvest it. This method was widely regarded as the most ethical and efficient way to manage cougars, as it minimized unnecessary killings and ensured that only problem or target animals were removed.

However, Ballot Measure 18, passed by Oregon voters in 1994, banned the use of dogs for hunting cougars and bears, citing concerns over cruelty and perceived unfairness in the hunting process. While well-intentioned, this measure has led to significant challenges in managing the state's cougar population over the past three decades.

Since the ban, Oregon's cougar numbers have steadily increased. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) estimates that the cougar population has more than doubled, with over 6,000 cougars now residing in the state. As a result, human-wildlife conflicts, livestock depredation, and impacts on prey species like deer and elk have escalated. Despite the increase in hunting tags issued, without the ability to use dogs, hunters struggle to effectively locate and harvest cougars, leading to ineffective population control.

The Consequences of the Ban on Using Dogs

1. Increasing Human-Cougar Conflicts

One of the most pressing concerns with Oregon's current cougar management strategy is the increasing number of human-cougar encounters. Cougars are naturally elusive and tend to avoid humans, but as their numbers grow, they are being spotted more frequently near homes, schools, and recreational areas. Several documented cougar attacks on pets, livestock, and even humans in Oregon highlight the dangers posed by an unchecked predator population. While fatal cougar attacks on people are rare, the risk has increased in recent years. For example, in 2018, Oregon recorded its first-ever fatal cougar attack when a hiker was killed in the Mount Hood National Forest. Such incidents underscore the need for a proactive, science-based management strategy, which should include the reinstatement of dogs in cougar hunting.

2. Impact on Livestock and Rural Communities

Oregon's ranchers and farmers have been particularly hard hit by the growing cougar population. Livestock losses due to cougar predation are costly and distressing, especially for small-scale ranchers. Cattle, sheep, and goats are frequent targets, leading to financial hardships for rural communities. When a cougar kills livestock, the ODFW often authorizes targeted removals. However, locating and eliminating the offending animal without the assistance of trained dogs is extremely difficult. As a result, many problem cougars remain at large, continuing to prey on livestock and exacerbating tensions between rural communities and state wildlife officials.

Reinstating the use of dogs would allow for the efficient removal of specific problem cougars rather than relying on random, less effective hunting methods or reactive killing after an attack has already occurred.

3. Unintended Ecological Consequences

The growing cougar population has also had significant effects on Oregon's ecosystem, particularly on deer and elk populations. While cougars are an important part of the natural balance, an overabundance of these predators can lead to declines in prey species, which in turn affects other carnivores and scavengers that rely on these populations.

In some areas of Oregon, declining deer and elk numbers have been attributed to increased predation by cougars. This has negative implications not only for hunters who rely on these species for food but also for natural ecosystems, where a sudden decrease in prey animals can lead to cascading effects on vegetation and other wildlife.

By reinstating dog-assisted hunting, wildlife managers would have a more effective tool for selectively managing cougar populations, ensuring that the predator-prey balance remains stable and sustainable.

The Benefits of Using Dogs in Cougar Hunting

1. More Ethical and Selective Hunting

One of the biggest advantages of using dogs in cougar hunting is that it allows for a highly selective process. When dogs tree a cougar, the hunter has the opportunity to observe the animal and determine whether it should be harvested. This prevents accidental killings of females with kittens or younger, non-threatening animals.

Without dogs, hunters often have only a brief moment to take a shot when they encounter a cougar, increasing the risk of wounding an animal rather than making a clean, humane kill. The use of dogs significantly reduces this risk, ensuring that any necessary kills are as ethical as possible.

2. Increased Effectiveness of Population Control

Despite the increasing number of cougar hunting tags issued in Oregon, success rates remain low because hunters cannot effectively track the elusive predators without dogs. As a result, even though the state technically allows hunting, it does not achieve meaningful population control.

In states like Idaho and Utah, where dog-assisted cougar hunting remains legal, wildlife agencies have been able to maintain stable and well-managed populations while minimizing conflicts. Oregon could benefit from adopting a similar approach by reinstating the use of dogs under a regulated and controlled hunting framework.

3. Enhancing Public Safety

Reintroducing dogs in cougar hunting would directly contribute to improved public safety. By allowing experienced hunters to remove problem cougars before they pose a direct threat to communities, the number of dangerous encounters could be significantly reduced.

Additionally, wildlife officials could use trained dogs to track and relocate cougars found near urban areas, providing a non-lethal management option in some cases.

Addressing Ethical Concerns

Opponents of using dogs in cougar hunting argue that the practice is inhumane. However, when compared to alternative methods such as trapping, poisoning, or uncontrolled shooting, dog-assisted hunting is actually one of the most ethical and effective ways to manage predator populations.

Furthermore, a well-regulated system that includes strict quotas, seasonal restrictions, and oversight from wildlife authorities can ensure that the practice is carried out responsibly and sustainably. Many hunters and conservationists support a balanced approach that prioritizes both cougar conservation and effective management.

Conclusion

Oregon's ban on using dogs for cougar hunting has led to a host of unintended consequences, including increasing human-wildlife conflicts, rising livestock losses, and disruptions to the state's ecosystems.

While cougars are an essential part of Oregon's natural environment, their unchecked growth has created challenges that require a more effective management approach.

Reinstating the use of trained dogs in cougar hunting would provide a humane, selective, and science-based solution to controlling the population while reducing conflicts with humans and livestock.

By adopting a well-regulated approach, Oregon can ensure that its cougar population remains healthy and sustainable while protecting public safety, rural livelihoods, and ecological balance.

Thank you for taking the time to hear my concerns. Hopefully these thoughts that I have shared have given some informed insight to the situation at hand and will have made a difference in how we handle things moving forward.