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Statement on increased cougar hunting SB 769

Oregon Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Wildfire

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My name is Dr. Robert Wielgus, I live in Bend, Oregon. I am the former (retired) Director of the Large Carnivore Conservation Lab at Washington State University.

I have studied large predators and their interactions with humans, prey, and livestock for over 35 years and have published over 35 peer reviewed scientific papers on predator/human interactions. I worked on and studied cougars in the field with Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) for 20 years (1997-2017).

We experienced the exact same thing in Washington as Oregon is currently experiencing. Increased cougar complaints, predation on mule deer, pet depredations, and livestock depredations. We increased hunting as proposed here. To test to see if an increase in hunting made people and livestock safer, we radio collared hundreds of cougars to see the effects. The results were astounding and completely counterintuitive.

Increased hunting resulted in increased immigration by young cougars, mostly teenage males. For every large resident male killed, 2 or 3 young guys came to the funeral. These young cougars were responsible for the increased complaints, predation on mule deer, predation on pets, and predation on livestock. The more cougars we killed...the worse it got. It was a treadmill.

By contrast, decreased hunting resulted in cougar emigration, decreased cougar complaints, decreased predation on mule deer, decreased pet depredations, and decreased depredation on livestock. The results were completely the reverse of that expected.... Here's how it works...Cougars are territorial...with older resident cats keeping out and killing younger immigrants. The older cats are cops. You don't get to be an older resident cat by killing pets, livestock, and attacking humans. Older cats prevent the young hooligans from moving into the neighborhood.

My lab and WDFW also found that the maximum growth rate without any hunting mortality of cougars was 14% and that the density of adult cougars was 2.2 cougars/100 km² in Washington, Idaho, and Montana.

We then restricted cougar harvest to 14% of 2.2 cougars /100 km² throughout all the Game Management Units in Washington. Problems with cougar complaints, pet depredations, and livestock depredation basically disappeared after we instituted the new policy.

Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) claims a density and population size 2-3 times higher than in Washington, Idaho, and Montana....because they count kittens in their estimates and the other states don't. ODFW claims a hunting mortality rate of about 14%...but this is based on their inflated density estimate that is twice as high as everyone else (because of kittens). Therefore, the actual mortality rate is also twice as high as reported...28% not 14%. At 28% mortality we had complaints go though the roof. I believe ODFW is overharvesting cougars, like we did in WA, and that is causing the increased problems.

I oppose SB 769 because I believe it will cause more, not less, problems in Oregon.

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