Dear Chair Golden and Committee Members,

Below are our comments on SB 769. Please oppose this bill and prevent individual counties from opting out of the voter's statewide ban on the practice of hunting cougars with hounds in Oregon.

As you know, there is an increasing amount of scientific research documenting the ecological importance of cougars (LaBarge, et al. 2022) and that killing adult cougars increases cougar-human conflict (Dellinger et al, 2021). While most of us are aware of the threat of bird flu to farm animals, the virus also infects hundreds of wild animal species including cougars. Marking a troubling development in the spread of the disease across species, two wild cougars on Washington's Olympic peninsula recently succumbed to bird flu (video).

A now-deceased male cougar, confirmed by Panthera and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife staff to have been infected with Avian influenza, is shown walking in a pasture from which it was too weak and disoriented to escape on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington state. The cougar's tail appears small as this individual allowed it to drag in the mud, an atypical behavior for the species. (Courtesy of Mark Elbroch / Panthera)

While the ecological value of and threats to cougars are undeniable, we believe that it is also important to recognize the incomparable value of personal encounters with cougars in the wild.

Encountering large carnivores in the wild is a profound experience

We have had the good fortune of encountering cougars six times in the Oregon Coast Range where we live. In one encounter, the cougar was less than fifteen feet away. Each encounter was an exhilarating experience where time seemed to stand still. Scientifically speaking, psychologists say we were "in a state of awe", a strange emotion which is a combination of extreme pleasure on the border of fear. It felt like everything changed after seeing our first cougar. Indeed,

psychologists say that “experiences of awe can change the course of a life in profound and permanent ways.” (Sierra Magazine, Oct 2 2014).

Allowing trophy hunting of adult cougars reduces opportunities for Oregonians to experience the profound weight of a cougar’s awesome gaze.

Living with cougars teaches important lessons in coexistence

Since 2017 our Coast Range neighborhood has hosted a cougar family. Getting to know Notch (in her right ear) and her kittens and learning how to live with cougars has been a valuable experience for residents of our neighborhood. Early on, a neighborhood meeting was held with ODFW staff to discuss strategies for coexistence and tolerance, and, over the years, neighbors have shared many memorable stories, photos, and videos of Notch and her family.

Video (click to play): Notch teaches her kitten that deer are what cougars eat (https://tinyurl.com/2wmjd6ey).

One evening, we had the remarkable experience of watching Notch for several hours as she “chirped” to her kitten hidden in nearby sword ferns. One neighbor shared a story of watching Notch kill a deer in her driveway while a family member stacked wood in the yard.

Allowing trophy hunting of cougars reduces opportunities for Oregonians to live with and observe cougars.

Notch travels through the neighborhood with her kitten.

Killing adult cougars increases cougar-human conflict

There are now numerous scientific studies which show that killing adult cougars (trophy hunting) increases livestock depredation and may also put the public at increased risk of dangerous encounters with young, orphaned cougars. Unfortunately, ODFW staff have been dismissive of this growing body of research conducted by international experts in cougar ecology (OPB News, Nov 7 2018).

In August 2019, a trail runner in Oregon State University's Dunn Forest was "investigated" as potential prey by a young cougar (Gazette-Times, Sep 18 2019). After reviewing news reports, a detailed description of the incident provided by the runner and consulting with cougar research scientists, it appears that the killing of an adult female cougar by a hunter resulting in orphaned kittens may have led to this negative encounter.

On October 6, 2019, ten months prior to the encounter in Dunn Forest, a frightened hunter shot and killed an adult female cougar 5.6 miles from the encounter site and her two kittens dispersed into the nearby OSU Forest (Gazette-Times, Oct 16, 2018).

On July 24, 2019, 38 days before the incident, OSU wildlife professor Jonny Armstrong's trail camera photographed a thin, sub-adult cougar drinking at Sulphur Springs less than three miles from the encounter site. This cougar matched the description provided by the runner (narrow in build but not emaciated) and the cougar treed and killed by ODFW near the incident site (75 lb, 1-2 year-old female).

A thin, sub-adult cougar drinks at Sulphur Springs, July 24, 2019 (Photo courtesy of Jonny Armstrong).

Cougar research scientists Mark Elbroch, Omar Ohrens, and John Laundre concluded that the encounter with the runner was most likely investigative behavior by an orphaned juvenile cougar. This young cougar's mother was likely killed before she could fully teach her offspring which food resources were appropriate.

Killing adult cougars, as practiced by trophy hunters, can lead to exploratory behavior by young, orphaned cougars and potentially dangerous encounters with humans.

Cougars are critical elements of healthy ecosystems, but they also can provide life-changing personal encounters. Psychologists say that experiencing awe can have "profoundly positive effects on people" including acting more generously and ethically and connecting us more deeply to the natural world.

We believe the legislature should do all that it can to encourage opportunities for Oregonians to be inspired by large carnivores like cougars. Lawmakers should encourage trophy hunters to call off their dogs, lay down their weapons and experience awe, rather than fear of, or dominion over, wild things. Please vote 'No' on SB 769.

Respectfully,

Randy and Pam Comeleo
Corvallis