Cougar Hunting Seasons and Regulations WAC 220-415-100

Anis Aoude
Game Division Manager, Wildlife Program
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• Summary
Background

- The changes we are proposing only relate to cougars hunting in the Blue Mountains Game Management Units (GMU)
- The proposal is intended to reduce cougar density to increase elk calf survival
Background

• Three Population Management Units (PMUs) within the Blue Mountains area; comprised of 13 GMUs.
Problem Statement
Blue Mountains elk

• Population declined ~20% from 2015-2017
• Despite antlerless harvest reductions, population continues to decline
Problem Statement
Blue Mountains elk

- Surveys indicate calf recruitment is insufficient to reverse the decline
- WDFW continue to document depressed calf:cow ratios
At-risk assessment
Blue Mountains elk

• An assessment was initiated in late 2020
• Objectives of the At-risk assessment were to:
  • Review available information (literature, data) to identify factors that may be limiting growth
  • Formulate management options to stop the decline
At-risk assessment
Blue Mountains elk

- The Department’s assessment reviews factors known to influence elk and elk populations:
  - Elk survival
  - Predation
  - Habitat
  - Human use
  - Climate
Actions and Timeline

- Autumn 2020 – Initiated at-risk assessment
- May 2021 - Initiated calf survival monitoring effort (*ongoing*)
- June 2021 - Initiated efforts to estimate black bear density in GMUs 162 and 166 (*analysis pending*)
- March 2022 - Finalize the at-risk assessment
- Includes monitoring analyses and management recommendations
- Briefing to FWC
- Spring/Summer 2022 – Review of assessment and recommendations
- Autumn 2022 - any actionable management measures, if approved, may be implemented
At-risk assessment
Carnivores

Wolf, bear, and cougar impacts on elk assessed through:

- Relevant literature review and summary
- Population status and harvest management review

- Reported impacts are variable
- Predation can limit growth, but other influential factors confound simple conclusions
- When the initial assessment was conducted there was limited contemporary information on the impacts of predation
At-risk assessment

Other influential factors

Habitat, disturbance, development, land use, and climate assessed through:

- Literature review
- Summary of relevant research and management activity

- Long history of habitat improvement in Blue Mtns
- Impact of disturbance unclear
- Nutrition is highly influential on elk population performance
- Climate, land use, disturbance all influence elk through direct and indirect effects
At-risk assessment

Summary

- Decline appears to be driven by trends in 3 core GMUs

- Disentangling interactive top-down, bottom-up and climatic effects is challenging

- Nutrition is a potential limiting factor
  - Understanding nutritional limitation requires multi-year intensive investigation
  - Limited management control
  - Long duration for response

- Predation is a potential limiting factor
  - Ongoing monitoring of juvenile elk survival
  - Broader management control
  - Short term action for nearer term response
At-risk assessment
Calf mortality

- 3 core GMUs continue to decline due to poor calf survival
- Calf survival is too low to reverse the decline
- Main cause of poor calf survival is predation
- Main predator is cougar
Things we heard

- Is habitat limiting?
  - Climate change
  - Fire
  - Changes in land management
- Is human disturbance an issue?
  - Shed hunting
  - Road closures
Background

Current cougar regulations

- 50 Population Management Units (PMUs)
  - Each comprised of 1 or more Game Management units

- General hunting season
  - Early season (Sept-Dec) and late season (Jan-Apr)

- Use cougar management guidelines
  - Harvesting at the estimate rate of growth to maintain a stable population (12-16%)
Background
Current cougar regulations

• Require mandatory harvest inspection for all successful hunters

• Field age estimation followed by laboratory aging
Background

Current cougar regulations

- Harvest guidelines for Blue Mountain PMUs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PMU</th>
<th>Hunt Area</th>
<th>12-16%</th>
<th>2021-2022 Harvest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>GMUs 145, 166, 175, 178</td>
<td>6-7</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>GMU's 149, 154, 157, 162, 163</td>
<td>7-9</td>
<td>9&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>GMUs 169, 172, 181, 186</td>
<td>5-6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>1</sup> adult only (age >2 years)
<sup>2</sup> based on field ages
<sup>3</sup> closed Jan 21, 2022
To improve elk calf survival, we must address predation

Among the options to address predation is to reduce the resident cougar population within the affected PMUs
Cougar Reduction options considered

- Agency removal
- Liberalize hunting seasons
  - Longer season
  - Increase or remove guidelines
  - Increase bag limit
Proposed Rule Changes
WAC 220-415-100
Cougar Hunting Season and Regulations
Proposed changes

- Editorial change under section (2)
  - Add the PMU number to each hunt area in the WAC

- Allow an individual to harvest a second cougar per license year in PMUs 9, 10, and 11 (Blue Mountains). (Section (4)(b))
Proposed changes

- A second tag will be required to harvest a second cougar
- The second tag will be valid only for PMUs 9, 10, and 11 (Blue Mountains)
Anticipated effects

- Reduced cougar density in the short term
- Increased calf survival
- Continued monitoring of cougar harvest
- Continue monitoring of calf survival
- Assess the efficacy of this proposed action if adopted
Public Comment

Common Themes

• Oppose increasing cougar harvest
• Oppose hunting in general
• Support the proposal as stated
• Suggest a longer season
• Seek higher guidelines
• Desire for use of hounds
Summary

The proposed change to cougar hunting season and regulations

• Supports the mandate of the department, the commission, and the director

• Allows the department to use recreational hunters as a management tool

• Supports conservation of wildlife
Questions