



Fish and Wildlife Commission Presentation Summary Sheet

Meeting date:

9/8/2023

Agenda item:

A petition that asks the commission to immediately begin rulemaking to amend WAC 220-415-100 (Cougar hunting seasons and regulations), to allow for a year-round cougar hunting season.

Presenter(s):

Eric Gardner, Wildlife Program Director.

Background summary:

In this petition dated July 19, 2023, the petitioner is asking for rulemaking to amend WAC 220-415-100 (Cougar hunting seasons and regulations) to allow for a year-round cougar hunting season. The petitioner argues that this is needed to keep nature in balance in a human-dominated landscape and to help curtail predation on ungulate neonates that are usually born in May and June.

The department currently manages cougars for stable numbers at the Population Management Unit (PMU) level. Guidelines for harvest in each PMU are set based on research-derived densities and population growth rates. The guidelines are not intended to be harvest targets, instead they are suggested upper limits on the recreational harvest in each PMU. These guidelines are intended to maintain populations at levels that presume all cougar territories in the habitat are occupied. Research shows that, absent any harvest, cougars will maintain those territories without an increase in density. The petitioner argues that many PMUs do not reach the guideline and remain open for harvest, so this WAC amendment would provide for more hunting opportunity in those PMUs if the season remained open year-round. We currently provide ample opportunity to hunt cougar. Hunting cougars year-round is unlikely to change the harvest opportunity as the units that remain open do not lend themselves to successful cougar harvest opportunity. Additionally, spring and summer conditions are not conducive to cougar harvest success.

The petitioner also argues that many wildlife species give birth in the Spring and that cougars benefit from that birth pulse. This is a true statement and can be interpreted as an argument against hunting cougars in the spring. Although cougars can have young any time of the year, there is a birth pulse in the spring likely related to abundant ungulate numbers. Even though it is illegal to kill spotted kittens, or an adult cougar accompanied by spotted kittens, cougar young are not mobile for the first few weeks of life and usually do not travel with the female during that period. Thus, hunting cougars during that period could increase the likelihood of orphaning their young.

The department monitors ungulate populations and could consider additional cougar removals when there is evidence that cougars are the limiting factor for ungulate population growth. Absent that need, cougars are

managed as any other game species for continued abundance and ecosystem function, which includes utilizing a limited harvest season approach.

Lastly, the department recently recommended that the cougar rule remain unchanged until the Game Management Plan (GMP) is complete, or until the Commission provides department staff direction in the form of a policy related to carnivore hunting. Given all these complexities and potentially undesirable consequences of a year-round season, the department recommends denying this petition.

Staff recommendation:

Department staff recommend denying this petition as it is not necessary and may have undesired consequences.

Policy issue(s) and expected outcome:

If this petition is denied no rule making will take place immediately to contemplate a year-round season on cougar.

Fiscal impacts of agency implementation:

The fiscal impact of this decision is minimal and is not different from the status quo.

Public involvement process used and what you learned:

The public were given notice of these petitions through the commission agenda and had an opportunity to submit written comment. There was no public involvement directly related to this petition prior to its submission. A public engagement process will occur if rule making occurs in the future.

Action requested and/or proposed next steps:

Dependent on Commission decision.

Draft motion language:

I move we deny this petition.

Post decision communications plan:

Communicate the outcome of the Commission's decision to the petitioner.