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**VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL – [odfw.commission@state.or.us](mailto:odfw.commission@state.or.us)**

Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission  
4034 Fairview Industrial Drive SE  
Salem, OR 97302

*Re: Designation of “Target Areas” for Cougar Management*

Dear Chair Finley and Members of the Commission:

Humane Oregon was formed in 2014 to help advocate for humane treatment of animals in Oregon’s political process and elections. On behalf of its board members and many supporters, Humane Oregon urges you not to adopt the proposal of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (“Department”) to designate “target areas” for reducing cougar populations.

Our primary objection to the proposal is that it would allow the killing of approximately 100 cougars by methods that a decisive majority of Oregon voters – likely to be an even more decisive majority today – have twice called inhumane (through ballot measures in 1994 and 1996). That should not be done absent a compelling objective and clear evidence that the program would work to achieve that objective. We see neither of those things here, even after reviewing the Cougar Management Plan, the staff reports, the staff presentation from the June meeting and other documents. In addition, we think the process for a decision of such obvious interest to the public has been woefully inadequate. We discuss these points further below.

1. The Department’s Process Has Failed To Provide Adequate Public Notice And Opportunity For Questions And Comments.

As the Commission and the Department know, cougar management in Oregon is an emotionally charged issue. Cougar hunting has been the subject of two ballot measures. It is the subject of proposed legislation virtually every legislative session, and each time it fills the hearing rooms. Still, as near as we can tell, the current proposal to kill more cougars with packs of dogs and cruel snares appears to have been buried throughout its consideration in a package of numerous issues generically labeled “Big Game Regulation.” As far as we can tell, there was no

press release separately announcing that the Department was considering new cougar target areas,<sup>1</sup> no separate hearing, and no Commission agenda separately identifying the issue. The issue was discussed at the Commission’s June meeting (also under the general heading of “Big Game Regulation”), but there was no specific proposal, and the minutes from that meeting still are not available online. The Department still had not determined its specific proposal when we called for information on September 23. The proposal was not posted online until September 25 or 28 (we are not sure which), and was again included only in the staff report addressing numerous other big game issues. By then it was too late to submit a comment that would be included in the information package sent to the Commissioners.

Given the public interest in this issue, the process for development and adoption of the proposed cougar target areas should have provided more public notice and more opportunity for public involvement. If nothing else, this proposal should be put off until that is done. The Department should hold at least one separately noticed public hearing specifically on this issue, the hearing should be announced in a press release, and any resulting target area proposal should be a separate Commission agenda item with reasonable notice of when it will be heard (and time to submit comments that will be included in the Commission packets).

2. The Proposal Would Allow Cougars To Be Killed By Methods That Most Oregonians Reject.

The main significance of designating target areas would be to allow approximately 100 cougars to be killed by private “agents” with packs of dogs, and by a shadowy ([some say barbaric](#)) government agency with snare traps. As the Commission knows, Oregon voters said decisively in 1994 and 1996 that hunting cougars with packs of dogs is inhumane. Oregon’s political shift of the past 20 years, and the continuing trend toward more compassion for animals, suggest the vote would be even more lopsided today. This is not surprising, since hound hunting terrorizes an animal into seeking refuge in a place where it has no chance of escape and can then be shot at close range.

Although current law allows use of dogs when ODFW or its “agents” ostensibly kill cougars for “management,” the Commission should respect the values of the majority of Oregonians and not allow such hunting unless there is a compelling objective for it and clear evidence that it will work to achieve the objective (neither of which are present here, as discussed below). For one thing, the line between sport hunting and management hunting is too difficult to draw. The “agents” no doubt do it for sport. (Frankly, we are suspicious that this proposal is really just for the benefit of sport hunters and managers who still resent the decisions of voters.) In any event, if hunting cougars with dogs for sport is inhumane, hunting cougars with dogs for “management” is inhumane, too. Surely the cougars can’t tell the difference.

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<sup>1</sup> The issue was mentioned along with numerous others issue in press releases regarding “big game tags,” but a cougar advocate is not going to know to look behind that title for a proposal on new target areas for cougars, which direct management killings as opposed to hunting with “tags.”

### 3. The Department Has Not Justified The Inhumane Killing.

In its latest Big Game staff report, the Department attempts to justify the proposed target areas for cougars based on “livestock/safety,” in one case, and reduced populations of deer and bighorn sheep, in the other three cases. However, the Department has not provided adequate evidence that cougars are causing significant problems in either respect.

For the “East Umpqua” area (which does not seem to be identified in the management area maps), the Department relies on data for Zone B as a whole (which seems like a fatal flaw to begin with). The data show that “complaints” related to livestock (88 in 2014) are above the “criteria” of 69 complaints, but there is no discussion of whether the variation is statistically significant (a critical part of any statistical analysis), whether a “complaint” in fact indicates a serious problem, or whether the increase is being caused by increased complaining as opposed to an increasing problems with cougars. Complaints related to human and pet safety are in fact *below* the criteria necessary to trigger target treatment.

The Department then notes that the number of cougars killed in Zone B as a whole, allegedly because of safety and/or livestock concerns, has been above the criteria since at least 2006. However, apparently that was not a big enough problem to propose a target area before, and we wonder whether the reporting system can reliably identify only those kills resulting from a *bona fide* threat to safety or livestock as opposed to over-reaction, sport shooting, or antipathy for cougars and/or cougar advocates. There is no discussion about actual attacks on people (we know of none), pets or livestock. In short, there is only questionable data about subjective impressions. We do not think that justifies killing more cougars with terrorizing packs of dogs and cruel snares.

The other three “target areas” are proposed primarily to increase mule deer populations for hunters. As a preliminary matter, we do not think that having more deer to shoot justifies killing more cougars in a way that the majority of Oregonians consider inhumane. In any event, the Department’s recommendation seems to be based entirely on populations of mule deer being below management objectives. What seems to be missing is proof that cougars are a primary cause of the problem. There is no discussion we have found – certainly none for the proposed target areas in particular – about the impact of cougars relative to other possible causes, such as loss of habitat, weather, changing patterns of vegetation, hunting, and/or stress from other human activity in the area (possibly including people hunting cougars with packs of dogs, since the Steens and Warner areas were target areas from 2010-13).

Failing to reliably identify cougars as a “primary factor” for depressed deer and sheep populations (much less any factor) is inconsistent with the Cougar Management Plan, which provides:

Only those Wildlife Management Units (WMU’s) where elk or deer populations are below established management objectives, have shown a history of decline and lack of ability to sustain themselves, *and where evidence indicates cougar predation is a primary factor*[,] may be targeted for cougar population reduction.

For bighorn sheep, areas around specific herds will be targeted *when evidence indicates cougar predation is a primary factor.*

(Cougar Management Plan, p. II (emphasis added).)

4. Killing Cougars Inhumanely Will Not Solve The Alleged Problems.

Even if reducing subjective “complaints” and having more deer to shoot were valid reasons for killing cougars by methods that most Oregonians find inhumane, the killing would not be justified because the Department has not shown that the killing would solve the alleged problems in any kind of sustained and meaningful way.

The staff report says “Department monitoring indicated that target area cougar removals between 2010 and 2013 positively affected mule deer populations in these units.” (October 9, 2015 Staff Report, p. 8.) However, there is no description of the “monitoring” or how it “indicated” the “removals” benefited deer populations (a tricky conclusion, at best, requiring, at least, reliable estimates of deer populations and controlling for other factors that may have influenced deer populations in the same time period).

In fact, the small amount of data the Department does provide (mule deer populations by year as a percentage of management objective) does not clearly support the conclusion that killing cougars inhumanely in the Steens and Warner units from 2010 to 2013 benefited deer populations. In the Warner unit, for example the population was relatively high before the targeting began and relatively low right after it ended (the opposite of what one would expect if the program worked). In the Steens unit, the numbers were roughly as high in 2006 (long before the program) as they were in any year during or after the program. We do not mean to suggest that simply eyeballing percentages like these is a reliable way to determine how the previous target programs affected deer populations (there are too many other variables to consider, and issues such as statistical significance and the quality of the input data), but the Department should not be suggesting that either.

In another recent document, the Department admits:

The effect of intensive, lethal management actions on the viability of local cougar populations *is not well understood*. Furthermore, it is *unknown* how quickly cougar populations recover to previous densities, and recovery times will influence the longevity of the effect of cougar removals, *if any*, on ungulate populations.

Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife Summary of Cougar Population Model and Effects of Lethal Control (“Summary”), p. 1 (March 4, 2015) (emphasis added).

The same document then discusses a mathematical model for determining how many cougars need to be killed each year to achieve a desired reduction in the overall cougar population. However, even if the model were perfectly accurate for predicting that, it would still

leave a big leap from a particular reduction in cougar population to a particular effect on deer and sheep populations.

Finally, the Department's model showed that, even if killing a particular percentage of a cougar population every year reduced the cougar population by half (the goal of the target program), "a hypothetical cougar population would return to the pre-removal population size in 2 – 6 years." (Summary, p. 2.) In other words, even assuming the Department could accurately predict how many cougars to kill to achieve a desired population reduction, and even assuming that could be shown to have the desired effect on deer and sheep populations, everything would go back to the way it was before in two to six years. Thus, even assuming the program otherwise made sense and were scientifically supported, there would be virtually no point to it unless it were perpetual, which we do not believe is consistent with the "target area" concept in the Cougar Management Plan, and which would be a cynical breach of the voters' trust in any event.

5. The Commission Should Direct The Department To Revisit The Cougar Management Plan.

Our review of this issue suggests a need to revisit the Cougar Management Plan. It appears the Plan was last updated in 2006. The intervening nine years have likely produced a considerable amount of new information on cougar populations in Oregon, cougar behavior, the impacts of cougars on humans and other animals, and the best ways to manage cougars. The Plan should be revisited to determine if it is consistent with the desires of the majority of Oregonians; if the stated goals for cougar abundance are consistent with those objectives based on the most current and best available science; and if prescribed management practices (including hound-hunting and snaring) are consistent with the values of the majority of Oregonians.

Thank you for considering our comments on this important issue.

Sincerely,

*Brian Posewitz*

Brian Posewitz, Administrator  
Rachel Perman, President  
Emily AhYou, Vice President  
Melissa Li, Board Member  
Scott Beckstead, Board Member  
Kathleen Lewis, Board Member  
Natasha Dolezal, Board Member  
Amy Sacks, Board Member

cc: Governor Kate Brown