

Trumped Up Charges—And a Feckless Act

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Generally speaking, state governors are making great strides in 2008. Idaho Governor Butch Otter and Wyoming Governor Dave Freudenthal made their states the [49th](#) and [50th](#) with felony penalties for dogfighting. Oregon Governor Ted Kulongoski [signed a bill](#) making it a felony to be a spectator at a dogfight. And Virginia Governor Tim Kaine enacted bills [making cockfighting a felony](#) and prohibiting the use of gas chambers at animal shelters.

But yesterday, Washington Governor Christine Gregoire took a [major step backwards for animals](#). She approved [House Bill 2438](#), backed by trophy hunters and opposed by animal advocates, expanding the use of dogs to hunt cougars. She took a position at odds with scientific wildlife management, humane treatment of animals, and the will of Washington citizens.

In 1996, Washington voters approved [Initiative 655](#) with a landslide 63% to 37% vote, putting an end to the baiting of bears and the hound hunting of bears, cougars, bobcats, and lynx. The electorate weighed the practices of chasing animals with packs of radio-collared dogs and shooting them from tree branches, and gunning down animals with their heads buried in piles of rotting meat and jelly doughnuts, and saw them for what they were: unsporting, inhumane, and unnecessary.

Over the last decade, trophy hunting groups have tried again and again to repeal I-655, and they've succeeded in chipping away at some of the law's core provisions with trumped up charges against cougars. A few years ago lawmakers approved a four-year pilot project restoring the hound hunting of cougars in five counties. The bill signed by Governor Gregoire yesterday extends that project for three more years, and what's worse, expands it statewide.

A seven-year pilot project spread across the state is no longer much of a test study—it's all but a blanket repeal of the ban on hunting cougars with dogs. If the legislature simply keeps appeasing the handful of trophy hunters and extending the project year after year, it's little different than hound hunting of cougars in perpetuity.

While the governor defended the bill as a way to protect public safety and livestock, it's a solution in search of a problem. Existing law already allows for the removal of individual cougars to protect animals, private property, or public safety—far more precise and effective than indiscriminate hound hunting of random animals. Hound hunting focuses state resources on scattershot killing at the expense of conflict resolution methods that actually work.

This comes at a time when the Department of Fish and Wildlife indicates that cougar populations may be in jeopardy, writing in its [report to the legislature](#) that “cougar density in the 5-county area appears to be low compared to other populations in the West and further declines may impact the population stability of cougars.” And Washington State University researchers working on the project [say that it's exacerbating](#), not mitigating, cougar conflicts: “Our management actions are achieving the exact reverse of what is desired. It's the shift in the age structure that results in the increased complaints. It's just disastrous. The heavy hunting that

we're doing in Washington State is *causing* increased human-cougar conflicts. The putative solution is causing the problem.”

It strains credulity that the state would even contemplate expanding a project that has been a complete failure. The department says that data collected from other counties won't be useful for the study, so not only does the hound hunting of cougars have no practical value, but it doesn't even have any research value, either.

When Gregoire ran for election in 2004 against Republican Dino Rossi, she had the support of animal advocates in the state, who rallied for her and pounded the pavement on her behalf. On election night it appeared that Rossi had won, but after three recounts, Gregoire emerged as the victor by just 129 votes.

Nearly two-thirds of Washington voters approved I-655, providing a much greater mandate for protecting cougars than they provided for Gregoire's role as chief executive. She has now substituted her judgment for the judgment of the voters, and when her name is on the ballot again this year, the people just might remember.