SB5356 Allowing the use of dog to hunt cougars
Bob McCoy – Oppose
Sammamish, WA 98075

RE: Allowing the use of dogs to hunt cougars (SB5356 and HB1124)

I am requesting that you vote NO on these respective bills.

In 1996 63% of voters approved Initiative 655 to limit the use of dogs to hunt cougars to specifically defined circumstances. Since then, the WDFW and legislature have bypassed the people by allowing temporary pilot programs of hounding cougars in selected counties. Now these two bills would again open the use of dogs in general cougar hunting.

A WDFW sponsored survey in 2008 included this analysis on one section:

> *"Trend: Support for reducing predators is less in 2008 (unweighted data) than it was in 2002 for three of the four reasons:*
>
> - *to address human safety (84% in 2002, **63% in 2008**),*
> - *to protect threatened or endangered species (76% in 2002, **64% in 2008**), and*
> - *to prevent loss of domestic animals or pets (69% in 2002, **53% in 2008**).*
> - *Support for reducing predators to increase game populations was about the same in the two years of study (40% in 2002**, 42% in 2008**)."*

The majority of the people are against using dogs to hunt cougars, still. The legislature should not override this majority to please a small contingent of hunting enthusiasts who would help WDFW manage cougar populations using, among the specified weapons, bows and muzzle loaders.

In a hunting attitudes survey sponsored by WDFW one of the outcomes was that:

> *"90% of respondents thought that scientific information was very or somewhat important in making game management decisions, with a large majority (68%) rating scientific information as very important."*

The sciences of trophic cascade and trophic collapse indicate that the reduction of apex predators such as cougars actually have far reaching effects that result in a reduction of wildlife habitat, as well as increased soil erosion. Some of the nation's foremost authorities in trophic sciences are at the University of Washington and Oregon State University, yet WDFW seems unaware of current science when they present a push-pull question such as:

> *"The overall health of deer and elk populations can vary due to factors like severe winters or poor habitat conditions. In some cases, when a deer or elk population is already depressed, predators such as cougar can hinder the population's ability to rebound. In cases like this, do you support or oppose using cougar hunting as a management tool to reduce cougar populations to increase deer or elk herds that are below population objectives?"*

Wouldn't the information that hunters in Washington killed over 42,000 deer and elk in 2008 lead one to better ask "…In cases like this, do you support or oppose restricting or

canceling hunting season as a management tool to increase deer or elk herds that are below population objectives?"

From the 2008 survey regarding cougars:

> *"Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of eleven statements pertaining to cougar management in Washington State. Over three-quarters of respondents agreed with the following statements:*
>
> - *"Livestock and pet owners who live in cougar habitat should be held responsible for taking steps to secure their animals" (93%);*
> - *"Cougars are an important and essential component of Washington ecosystems" (92%);*
> - *"Cougars were here before humans and have an inherent right to live in Washington" (92%);*
> - *"Cougars are part of the legacy I want to leave to future people of Washington" (91%);*
> - *"Individuals living near cougars should be held responsible for taking steps to minimize the chance of human/cougar conflict" (90%);*
> - *"I derive satisfaction from just knowing cougars are present in Washington" (83%);*
> - *"Large predators such as cougars help to control populations of large game species" (77%).""*

Politically, the surveys do not support the override of Initiative 655.

Once I-655 passed, WDFW literally declared open war on cougars, selling low-cost tags in package deals. According to Donny Martorello, WDFW Bear, Cougar, Furbearer Section Mgr in a Fall 2003 report titled "Cougar Harvest," cougar hunting tags "increased from less than 1,000 annually prior to I-655 to about 58,000 post I-655." The number of cougars killed exceeded the pre-I-655 seasons.

Dr. Martorello also testified to the committee that the hunting statistics and the complaints are unrelated. Since WDFW showed the cougar complaints dropping in hounding counties since the pilot program, I picked the complaint data from WDFW's bar charts posted on their website to create this graph:

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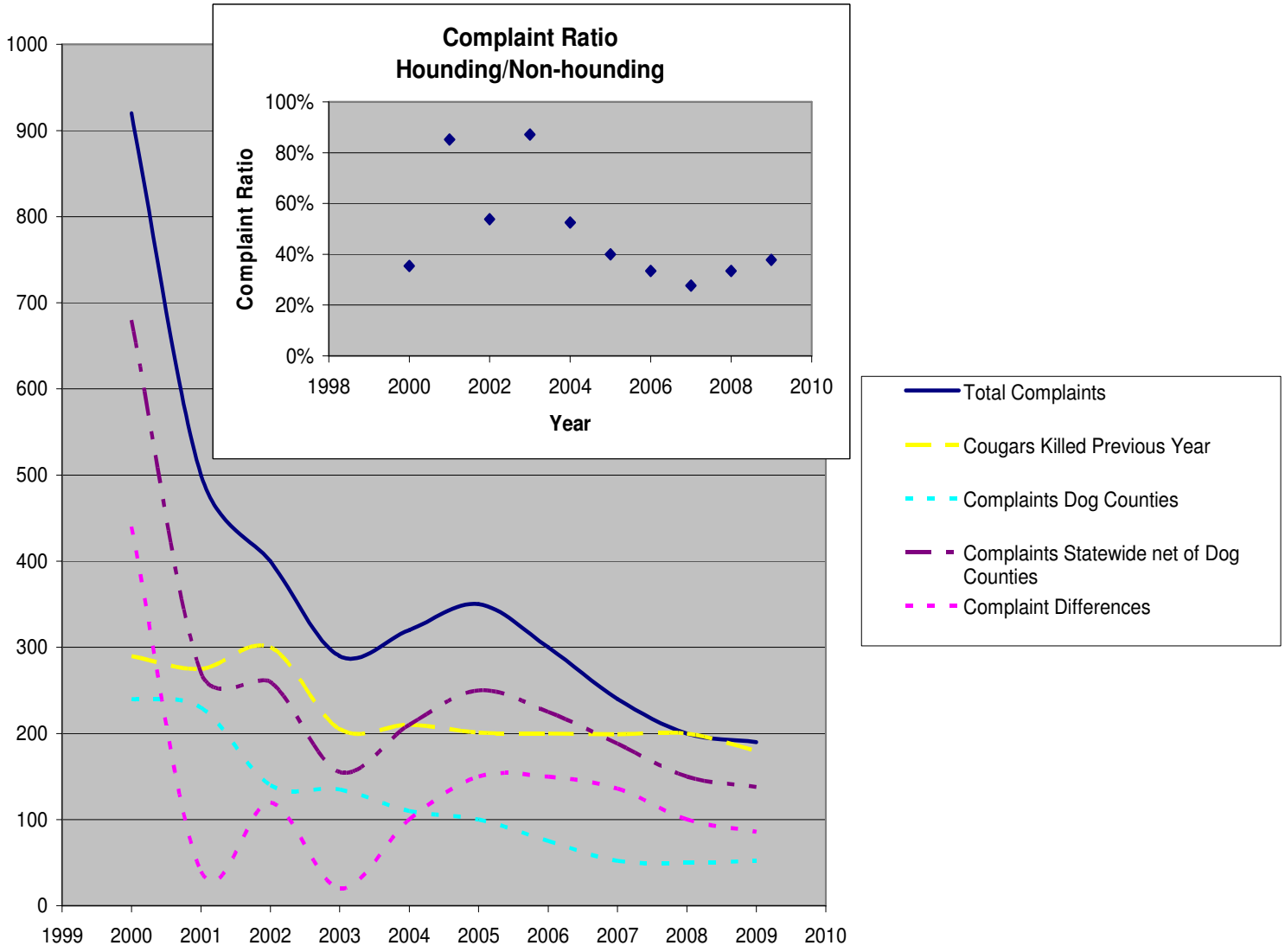

What is noticeable is that complaints dropped statewide, and that the ratio of complaints in hounding counties is currently rising. Complaints do not indicate success of the program, and if we use complaints as a goal, one would expect words to indicate complaint ratios should decrease rapidly relative to non-hounding counties. Since, as testified, they are unrelated, we should base our goals on stated objectives such as health and viability of cougar populations.

The impact on cougar populations as WDFW radically increased the sale of cougar tags became apparent as noted in this article:
Journal of Wildlife Management 70(1):246-254. 2006
doi: 10.2193/0022-541X(2006)70[246:CPDAVI]2.0.CO;2
"Cougar Population Dynamics and Viability in the Pacific Northwest." The authors concluded their abstract thusly (my emphasis):

> *"Contrary to accepted belief, our findings suggest that **cougars** in the Pacific Northwest are currently **declining**. Increased conflicts between cougars and humans in this area could be the result of the 1) very young age structure of the population caused by heavy hunting, 2) increased human intrusion into cougar habitat, 3) low level of social acceptance of cougars in the area, or 4) habituation of cougars to humans. **To help preserve this population, we recommend reduced levels of exploitation, particularly for adult females, continuous monitoring, and collaborative efforts of managers from adjacent states and provinces."***
> **http://www.jstor.org/pss/3803567**

Cougars make their living staying out of sight; inability to stay out of sight may well reflect a stress upon their population. Neither poaching nor non-compliance (with kill reporting) statistics seem to be available. Orphaned kittens or cats killed by poachers do not count in kill statistics, so one must wonder how WDFW or any other entity can manage the population by creating kill quotas. Oregon statistics imply that hunters and poachers kill far more cats than the one-third of Oregon hunters who respond to mandatory reporting requirements.

The WDFW Game Management Plan July 2003 - June 2009 states:

> *"A more realistic estimate of statewide cougar abundance is about 2,600 animals."*

On the (undated) WDFW web page "Living with Wildlife," the section titled "Cougars (Mountain Lions)" states:

> *"The cougar population for the year 2008 was estimated to be 2000 to 2,500 animals."*
> http://wdfw.wa.gov/living/cougars.html

In "Cougar Outreach and Education in Washington State November 2010," we learn that

> *"Washington's cougar population is about 1,900 to 2,100 resident animals (excludes transient subadults), including kittens."*
> http://wdfw.wa.gov/publications/01162/wdfw01162.pdf

The WDFW Game Management Plan July 2003 - June 2009 states:

> *"Since 1996, the shift to harvesting more females and younger animals (as well as more total animals) likely is causing the statewide cougar population to decline."*

The GMP issue statement makes clear that hunting is not a prime goal and that reliable population data is a necessity (my emphasis):

> *"A fundamental goal of WDFW is to preserve, protect, and perpetuate wildlife populations and their habitats to ensure healthy, productive populations. The starting point for achieving this goal is reliable information on the status of wildlife populations and the potential impacts of particular management actions, such as hunting. Given a variety of limitations, the accuracy and precision of the biological data to assess populations are often lower than biologists would*

> *prefer. In these situations**, management decisions favor a conservative approach, to reduce the probability of causing significant negative impacts to the wildlife resource.**"*
> http://wdfw.wa.gov/publications/00399/wdfw00399.pdf

An estimated population loss of as much as 25% should give WDFW pause in issuing 60,000 boot tags for cougars, especially since cougars are a keystone species.

In an article about counting cougars, more research about the deleterious effects of cougar hunting:

> *"Rob Wielgus, director of the Large Carnivore Conservation Lab at WSU…. His research team has found that in parts of the state where the number of complaints has been highest, cougar populations are either holding steady or declining. That the big cats are becoming more visible, but not more numerous, is just one of the paradoxes stemming from the same source: much of what we thought we knew about cougars is wrong.*
>
> *"The science is the science," [Wielgus] says. "People say, 'I know that there's more cougars than ever, because I just know.' What we're saying is, there aren't more now, you've just seen more, because you've killed all the big guys that kept out these young troublemakers.'"*
> http://wsm.wsu.edu/s/index.php?id=592

When we artificially remove dominant male cougars from their territory, that opens the territory to *prematurely* dispersing young males that are disproportionately more likely to get into trouble with humans.

When we artificially remove female cougars from the population, up to ½ of the time that action will orphan dependent kittens that are disproportionately more likely to get into trouble with humans.

Some cougar experts now speculate that hound hunting selects for stronger and more aggressive cougars since a typically timid cougar will tree and be killed.

California does not allow cougar hunting for sport. These statistics are from California:

> *"The California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) logs hundreds of Wildlife Incident Reports annually related to mountain lion sightings. On average, fewer than three percent of these reports result in a mountain lion being identified as an imminent threat to public safety and killed under the CDFG's Wildlife Public Safety Guidelines.*
> *The vast majority of these reports (79 percent) are resolved by providing information about the natural history and behavior of mountain lions. Another 18 percent of cases are legitimate threats posed by mountain lions that can be resolved by modifying human behavior."*
> -- California Department of Fish and Game Website
> http://www.dfg.ca.gov/news/issues/lion/trends.html

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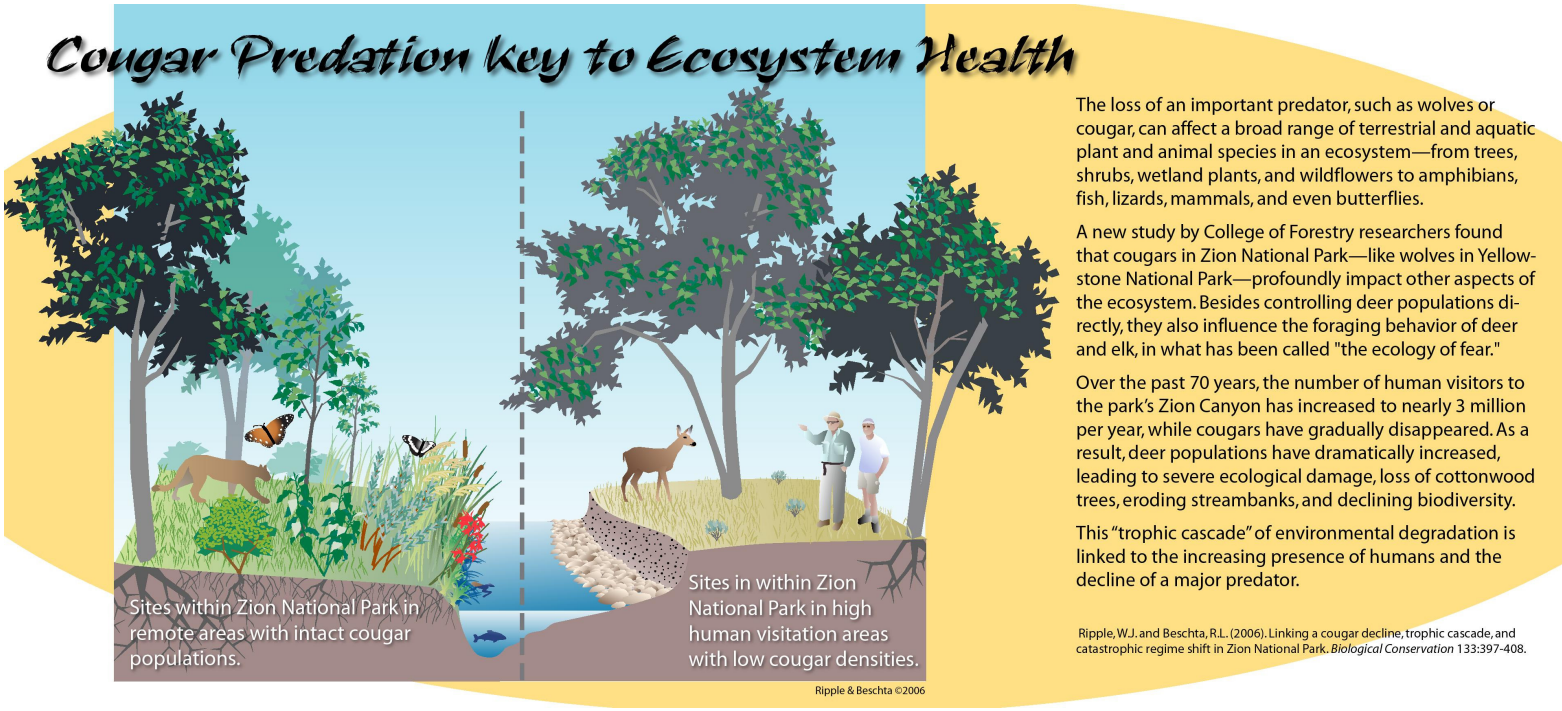
Scientists now understand better the environmental effects of removing apex predators, and the results are not good. A scientific study compared Zion National Park to a nearby area, North Creek. North Creek had a stable cougar population.

> *"Increases in human visitors in Zion Canyon apparently reduced cougar (Puma concolor) densities, which subsequently led to higher mule deer (Odocoileus hemionus) densities, higher browsing intensities and reduced recruitment of riparian cottonwood trees (Populus fremontii), increased bank erosion, and reductions in both terrestrial and aquatic species abundance. These results may have broad implications with regard to our understanding of alternative ecosystem states where large carnivores have been removed or are being recovered."*

"Linking a cougar decline, trophic cascade, and catastrophic regime shift in Zion National Park"
William J. Ripple, Robert L. Beschta
College of Forestry, Oregon State University, Forest Resources, Corvallis, OR 97331, United States
http://www.cof.orst.edu/leopold/papers/cougar_cascades_ripple_beschta_2006.pdf



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The People understand the need for ranchers to maintain profitability; the citizens of Washington have excused ranchers from the B&O tax, and have allowed them property tax incentives for open lands:

> *"84.34.010*
> *Legislative declaration.*
> *The legislature hereby declares that it is in the best interest of the state to maintain, preserve, conserve and otherwise continue in existence adequate open space lands for the production of food, fiber and forest crops, and to* ***assure the use and enjoyment of natural resources and scenic beauty for the economic and social well-being of the state and its citizens****.*
> *84.34.020*
> *Definitions.*
> *As used in this chapter, unless a different meaning is required by the context:*
> *(1) "Open space land" means*
> *(a) any land area so designated by an official comprehensive land use plan adopted by any city or county and zoned accordingly, or*
> *(b)* ***any land area****, the preservation of which in its present use would*
> *(i)* ***conserve and enhance natural or scenic resources****, or*
> *(ii)* ***protect streams or water supply****, or*
> *(iii) promote conservation of soils, wetlands, beaches or tidal marshes, or*
> *(iv)* ***enhance the value to the public of abutting or neighboring parks, forests, wildlife preserves, nature reservations or sanctuaries or other open space****, or*
> *(v) enhance recreation opportunities, or*
> *[….]"*

Additionally, compensation may be available under RCW 77.36.

Certainly, the citizens of Washington expect that these incentives reduce the financial risks of agriculture, and since we are compensating for risk and for environmental conservation, the ranchers cannot expect to have zero risk with regard to depredation by removing a keystone species from the environment—a species that over 90% of the population believe are an essential part of Washington's ecosystem and has a right to life. Over 90% believe that humans must make adjustments to co-exist with Puma concolor. The cost to the ecosystem to try proactively to reduce a miniscule risk to zero is far too high to contemplate.

I again quote Dr. Wielgus (from an article):

> *"Look, you have a belief. Fine. Test the belief. That's what we're doing now. We have study areas where they're heavily hunted, and we have areas where they're virtually not hunted at all. And the interesting thing is, the areas where we aren't hunting cougars heavily, it's virtually zero in human complaints."*
> *He understands the concern over encounters with cougars, but says we need to find a different response than killing more of the big cats.*

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> *"Our management actions are achieving the exact reverse of what is desired," he says. "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."*
> http://wsm.wsu.edu/s/index.php?id=592

We pay for conservation; we shoulder some financial risk to benefit farmers--shouldn't we listen to the scientists about what works? We cannot afford to pay to "achieve the exact reverse of what is desired!"

The People started an initiative, collected signatures, and won an overwhelming majority on I-655. The People were reasonable in allowing for the use of dogs in specified cases, and there are no overwhelming scientific, legal, safety, or popular political reasons to overturn the results of that initiative.

Please vote NO on these bills.

Bob McCoy
Sammamish, WA 98075