



MOUNTAIN LION FOUNDATION

Saving America's Lion

Our mission is to ensure America's lion survives and flourishes in the wild.

Dear Chair Limón,

On behalf of the Mountain Lion Foundation's 6,000+ members in California, our long history working to protect California's mountain lions from cruel and needless persecution, and on behalf of the millions of Californians who care about the well-being of our state's protected and beloved mountain lions, we write to respectfully and strongly oppose Senate Bill 818. This bill would create a permit for taking mountain lions with hounds, allowing the public to purchase a license to chase and harass mountain lions, contrary to the provisions of Proposition 117, the California Wildlife Protection Act of 1990, and contrary to the spirit of wildlife protection and restoration that won that proposition broad and sustained public support.¹

SB 818 is founded on flawed scientific claims and would interfere with existing research in the region proposed for a pilot study. Because SB 818 is based on a misunderstanding of the behavior and ecology of mountain lions, it risks significant harm to that specially protected species, and to the human and ecological communities that coexist with and rely upon mountain lions. We share the sponsor's desire to understand and deploy the best tools for preventing conflict between people and mountain lions, but this bill would fuel that conflict and reduce public safety. We ask that the committee oppose SB 818.

SB 818 is unlawful

Proposition 117 established mountain lions as a "specially protected mammal" in California, and made it illegal to "take, injure, possess, transport, import, or sell any mountain lion." California Fish & Game Code § 86 defines "take" as "hunt, pursue, catch, capture, or kill, or attempt to hunt, pursue, catch, capture, or kill." Whether or not the hunt ends with a dead mountain lion, recreational hound hunts for mountain lions are flatly prohibited by Proposition 117. SB 818 would require the state Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) to sell a hounding permit for use in El Dorado County. **Such a recreational permit is exactly what voters outlawed in 1990.**

Even though the pursuit-only "hazing" explicitly authorized in SB 818 is "take" and thus prohibited under Prop 117, it is worth noting the risk that SB 818 opens the door to *de facto* lethal hunting. Once a lion is treed and the handler arrives to call off the team, there is a risk that the less scrupulous hound handler or others in the party might claim to feel threatened by the treed cat and then kill it. In practice, therefore SB 818 could, in some cases, result in full-blown lethal hound hunting. Authorizing both experienced and amateur hound teams to roam El Dorado County in pursuit of lions also increases risks that people who find a mountain lion would simply "shoot, shovel, and shut up," poaching the lion at the end of that otherwise-authorized hunt. This is not just hyperbole — any casual observer of recent social media activity from El Dorado County can find *many* instances of residents encouraging their neighbors to illegally kill lions, and SB 818 would facilitate this unethical and illegal practice.

Proposition 117 made clear that changes to mountain lion regulations could only be adopted with the agreement of four fifths (80%) of the state legislature, and only if those changes were "consistent with

¹ SB 818 Section 1(h) wrongly describes the 4 point margin of Proposition 117's victory as "narrow," but omits any mention of 1996's Proposition 197, Proposition 117 was retained by an overwhelming 16 point margin.

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and further the purposes of this act.” That is clearly not the case for SB 818. The Mountain Lion Foundation was founded by the volunteers who worked to pass Proposition 117, and based on that history and institutional knowledge, we can assure the legislature that SB 818 is not consistent with that act, nor does it further the purposes or values that motivated that landmark initiative.

SB 818 is bad science

SB 818 is flawed as a matter of public policy and science. The prefatory Section 1 makes numerous statements that are not supported by modern mountain lion research, or which misrepresent key findings from that research. This passage leans heavily on the tragic death of a young man in El Dorado County in 2024, the first fatal mountain lion encounter in 20 years anywhere in California. It suggests that rewriting Proposition 117 is the only way to prevent such tragedies, despite the fact that such incidents are, and remain, incredibly rare. Unwanted encounters with mountain lions remain rare even as the statewide mountain lion population recovers from a centuries-long campaign of extirpation and California’s human population, and outdoor recreation in mountain lion habitat, have only increased.

Extensive research in California and other western states has shown that killing or otherwise removing mountain lions does not reduce livestock depredations or unwanted encounters with people, and indeed there is a growing body of evidence showing that those actions can make such conflict *more* likely.² For example, killing or removing mature mountain lions disrupts their social structure, creating room for younger, more conflict-prone cats to move into that open space.³ Those younger unexperienced animals are less prepared to hunt wildlife and are less familiar with the landscape, and can inadvertently find themselves near humans or livestock, or may force females with cubs closer to humans.⁴ In addition, adult females who are killed often leave behind dependent kittens or subadults, and these orphans are also especially conflict-prone, since they have not yet learned to hunt the species’ preferred prey effectively.⁵

CDFW and scientists from Utah State University are currently beginning a study in and around El Dorado County that would perform randomized trials of a range of deterrents, including nonlethal deterrents

² Dellinger JA, Macon DK, Rudd JL, Clifford DL, Torres SG. (2021) Temporal trends and drivers of mountain lion depredation in California, USA. *Human Wildlife Interactions*.15(1). doi:10.26077/c5bb-de20; Laundré JW, Papouchis C. (2020) The Elephant in the room: What can we learn from California regarding the use of sport hunting of pumas (*Puma concolor*) as a management tool? *PLoS ONE* 15(2). doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0224638; Peebles KA, Wielgus RB, Maletzke BT, Swanson ME. (2013) Effects of remedial sport hunting on cougar complaints and livestock depredations. *PLoS ONE*. 8(11). doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0079713; Elbroch LM, Treves A. Why might removing carnivores maintain or increase risks for domestic animals? *Biological Conservation*. 2023;283:110106. doi:10.1016/j.biocon.2023.110106; Teichman KJ, Cristescu B, Darimont CT. Hunting as a management tool? Cougar-human conflict is positively related to trophy hunting. *BMC Ecology*. 2016;16(1). doi:10.1186/s12898-016-0098-4

³ Laundré JW, Papouchis C. The Elephant in the room: What can we learn from California regarding the use of sport hunting of pumas (*Puma concolor*) as a management tool? *PLoS ONE*. 2020;15(2). doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0224638; Logan KA, Sweanor LL. *Desert Puma: Evolutionary Ecology And Conservation Of An Enduring Carnivore*. Covelo, California: Island Press; 2001; Teichman KJ, Cristescu B, Darimont CT. Hunting as a management tool? Cougar-human conflict is positively related to trophy hunting. *BMC Ecology*. 2016;16(1). doi:10.1186/s12898-016-0098-4

⁴ Benson JF, Sikich JA, Riley SPD. Individual and Population Level Resource Selection Patterns of Mountain Lions Preying on Mule Deer along an Urban-Wildland Gradient. *PLOS ONE*. 2016;11(7):e0158006. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0158006

⁵ Mattson D. *Mountain Lions of the Flagstaff Uplands Mountain Lions of the Flagstaff Uplands Progress Report*. Washington, D.C.; 2007.

like visual barriers, electrified fladry, and motion-activated deterrent devices, as well as hazing with hounds by trained and regulated houndspeople. This program, already underway, would be disrupted if the poorly defined hounding permit pilot program under SB 818 were enacted.

SB 818 Section 3c requires CDFW to issue open-ended permits to harass wildlife. Such pursuits are not selective and can have serious unintended consequences. Teams of hounds would wander at large across the forests and backyards of the county, potentially attacking and killing mountain lions and their cubs, other wildlife (including endangered species), people recreating outdoors, pets, or livestock. SB 818 has no provision to limit this pursuit to wildlife that has actually caused any conflict. Nor does it ensure that the hounds would be under close supervision of a handler, let alone that the hazing would be conducted under the sorts of controls that would produce quality science. **This is a back-door hound hunting season, not science.**

SB 818 hurts California's mountain lions

California voters banned mountain lion hunting for several reasons, including because they considered it an unnecessary risk to this treasured, iconic California species. Voters were horrified by the thought of houndspeople releasing packs of hounds to chase lions until the cats' exhaustion led them to seek safety in a tree, at which point a hunter arrived to kill the lion. In the decades since Proposition 117 passed, technology has advanced, and now hounds can chase mountain lions with their handlers miles away, monitoring the hounds by GPS. This change makes it difficult to call hunting dogs off quickly if they attack pets, livestock, endangered species, a pregnant or lactating mountain lion, or cubs.

The "non-lethal" hound hunting mandated by SB 818 could very quickly become lethal. In addition to the likelihood of hound handlers killing a treed lion, the act of hound pursuit creates real risks to mountain lions.

When a mountain lion is killed or driven away from its home range, it cannot care for young cubs.

Mountain lions provide up to two years of parental care. Hounds chasing a mother lion might attack and kill cubs as they pass by or drive the mother so far away that the cubs starve or are attacked by other wildlife in her absence. Those starving cubs may not be ready to hunt deer or other wild prey, and in desperation may wander closer to communities and threaten pets or livestock they encounter. Those cubs may then be captured and killed by wildlife officers, a direct but unseen consequence of a hound pursuit days or weeks earlier.

Hound teams may also disrupt the social structure of mountain lions, driving them into dangerous rival's home range or away from the prey, shelter, and water they rely on. **Especially during cold mountain winters, a lost or injured lion can starve or freeze to death.**

Mountain lions are a valued part of California's wilderness heritage, beloved by millions of people who live near them in every part of the state. Famously, Los Angeles embraced P-22 during his life in and near Griffith Park, seeing parallels with their lives in his struggles with small living space, difficulty finding a mate, and threats from car collisions and the lack of road crossings.

While Southern California communities have large numbers of people and livestock living and recreating at high density near mountain lion populations, the emphasis on finding a peaceful *modus vivendi* with mountain lions has meant far fewer negative interactions than are claimed in El Dorado County. Across the state and the nation, mountain lions are among the most common school mascots, another testament to the value people place on these elusive creatures.

Numerous studies have documented the many ecological benefits mountain lions provide to maintaining and enhancing biodiversity. A recent study found that researchers have documented more ecological interactions between mountain lions and other species than for any other carnivore, ranging

from deer to trees, and even salmon and beetles.⁶ The restoration of mountain lions to ecosystems where they had been extirpated has been shown to help restore threatened vegetation.⁷ They have also been demonstrated to preferentially hunt deer infected with chronic wasting disease, and their digestive systems remove much of the infectious prions which cause that disease.⁸ Restoration of mountain lion populations in South Dakota was associated with a significant drop in deer-vehicle collisions, saving lives and preventing at least \$1.5 million/year in collision-related expenses there.⁹ The same changes to deer behavior that cause these changes near traffic may also reduce agricultural losses to deer.

SB 818 hurts communities and livestock

Hound hunting, even when it is intended to be non-lethal as in SB 818, creates real risks to wildlife, livestock, pets, people, and communities. Chasing, and potentially killing, mountain lions, also increases risks to people. As discussed above, removing mature mountain lions from their ecological communities can inadvertently increase the likelihood of conflict with people and livestock. **Hound pursuit itself can also create direct risks to livestock and people.**

In states where hound hunting for mountain lions is legal, hound teams have attacked bird dogs, dogs on leashes, livestock, and even endangered species like jaguars. Entire hound teams have had to be euthanized after attacking rabid skunks, unbeknownst to the handler.

Research in California has shown, and other states have confirmed, that killing more mountain lions makes it more likely that livestock might later be at risk.¹⁰ A mature, resident mountain lion is unlikely to approach people or livestock. Research by CDFW and other wildlife agencies shows this consistently.¹¹

⁶ LaBarge LR, Evans MJ, Miller JRB, Cannataro G, Hunt C, Elbroch LM. Pumas *Puma concolor* as ecological brokers: a review of their biotic relationships. *Mammal Review*. 2022;52(3):360–376. doi:10.1111/mam.12281

⁷ Ripple, William J., and Bechta, Robert L. "Linking a cougar decline, trophic cascade, and catastrophic regime shift in Zion National Park." *Biological Conservation*, vol. 133, 2006, pp. 397-408.

⁸ Krumm CE, Conner MM, Hobbs NT, Hunter DO, Miller MW. Mountain lions prey selectively on prion-infected mule deer. *Biology Letters*. 2010;6(2):209–211. doi:10.1098/rsbl.2009.0742; Miller, M *et al.* "Lions and Prions and Deer Demise." *PLoS ONE*, vol. 3, no. 12, 2008, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0004019>; Wild, Margaret A., *et al.* "The Role of Predation in Disease Control: A comparison of selective and nonselective removal on prion disease dynamics in deer." *Journal of Wildlife Disease*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2011, pp. 78–93; Baune, Chris, *et al.* "Reduction of Chronic Wasting Disease Prion Seeding Activity Following Digestion by Mountain Lions." *mSphere*, vol. 6, no. 6, 2021.

⁹ Gilbert, Sophie Louise, *et al.* "Socioeconomic Benefits of Large Carnivore Recolonization Through Reduced Wildlife-Vehicle Collisions." *Conservation Letters*, vol. 10, 2016, pp. 431-39

¹⁰ Dellinger JA, Macon DK, Rudd JL, Clifford DL, Torres SG. (2021) Temporal trends and drivers of mountain lion depredation in California, USA. *Human Wildlife Interactions*.15(1). doi:10.26077/c5bb-de20; Laundré JW, Papouchis C. (2020) The Elephant in the room: What can we learn from California regarding the use of sport hunting of pumas (*Puma concolor*) as a management tool? *PLoS ONE* 15(2). doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0224638; Peebles KA, Wielgus RB, Maletzke BT, Swanson ME. (2013) Effects of remedial sport hunting on cougar complaints and livestock depredations. *PLoS ONE*. 8(11). doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0079713; Elbroch LM, Treves A. Why might removing carnivores maintain or increase risks for domestic animals? *Biological Conservation*. 2023;283:110106. doi:10.1016/j.biocon.2023.110106; Teichman KJ, Cristescu B, Darimont CT. Hunting as a management tool? Cougar-human conflict is positively related to trophy hunting. *BMC Ecology*. 2016;16(1). doi:10.1186/s12898-016-0098-4

¹¹ Kertson BN, Spencer RD, Marzluff JM, Hepinstall-Cymerman J, Grue CE. Cougar space use and movements in the wildland–urban landscape of western Washington. *Ecological Applications*. 2011;21(8):2866–2881. doi:10.1890/11-0947.1; Benson JF, Sikich JA, Riley SPD. Individual and Population Level Resource Selection Patterns of Mountain

Killing or chasing an established resident lion opens room on the landscape for more lions, often younger and more conflict-prone, to occupy the space. The more this occurs, the greater the likelihood that these inexperienced young lions will venture too close to livestock or people.

There are better, cheaper, and more effective solutions

While hazing or lethal responses have not proven effective at reducing human-wildlife conflict, there are tools available with proven track records. Non-lethal technological deterrents like low-cost, motion-activated speakers and lights have been widely and successfully used by livestock owners living alongside mountain lions and other carnivores around the world.¹² In addition, age-old tools like well-designed fencing and livestock guardian dogs have proven successful for thousands of years.¹³

Proposition 117 and laws including 2013's AB 132, adding Section 4801.5 to the Fish and Game Code, leave room for the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and other agencies to promote these tools, to assist community members in deploying these tools, and to work with nonprofit partners like the Mountain Lion Foundation to provide education and deployment of these resources. Unfortunately, recent budget cuts have reduced the number of wildlife conflict specialists at CDFW, depriving communities of a proven and effective resource that could prevent conflict.

In Section 1(o), SB 818 states that El Dorado County is “doing everything possible” to reduce conflict with mountain lions. Unfortunately, this is not true. During public testimony at county board of supervisor meetings, county residents described witnessing methods that they use to prevent conflict, called neighbors out for doing nothing to protect livestock and for feeding deer—mountain lions’ main food source. County officials have acknowledged that deer feeding near livestock and communities is a serious issue that the county has yet to address. Despite science showing that killing mountain lions tends to increase conflict in later years, El Dorado County has the highest reported rates of lethal response to mountain lion conflicts in the state.¹⁴ The conflict numbers cited in SB 818 Section 1 are inaccurate and were openly disputed by the Director of CDFW in that same public meeting. If indeed there has been an increase in conflict, the existing science points to policy changes the county could make, but has not taken, that would reduce mountain lion mortality and increase public safety. **By bringing in additional hound pursuit, and likely increasing mountain lion deaths, SB 818 will only double down on that failed strategy.**

SB 818 is needless, risky, and against the will of Californians

The protections mountain lions enjoy in California reflect the consistent will of the people, expressed at ballot boxes, in donations and volunteer hours for conservation and rescue efforts, as well as widespread outpourings of support for wildlife crossings across the state. SB 818 blows a hole in those popular protections. It does so to create an ill-defined pilot study of a program which the best,

Lions Preying on Mule Deer along an Urban-Wildland Gradient. *PLOS ONE*. 2016;11(7):e0158006.

doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0158006

¹² Treves, A., Fergus, A. R., Hermanstorfer, S. J., Louchouart, N. X., Ohrens, O., & Pineda-Guerrero. (2024). Gold-standard experiments to deter predators from attacking farm animals. *Animal Frontiers*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/af/vfad072>

¹³ See, e.g., Munro, ND and Stiner, MC (2020) “A zooarchaeological history of the Neolithic occupations at Franchthi Cave and paralia in southern Greece,” *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaa.2020.101162>

¹⁴ <https://nrm.dfg.ca.gov/FileHandler.ashx?DocumentID=217926&inline>, showing that 17-31% of lethal take permits in recent years were issued in that one county. Those numbers may not include lethal removals by Wildlife Services, nor “shoot, shovel, and shut up” poachings.

consensus-validated research does not support, and does so in a way that could interfere with existing research efforts. SB 818's recreational hound hunting permits would create risks to wildlife, livestock, pets, and people. There is no science to suggest that this program could do anything to reduce human-wildlife conflict, and good science to indicate that it would likely exacerbate such conflict. We respectfully oppose this legislation and urge a vote against this bill.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Brent Lyles", with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

Brent Lyles
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