

## Mountain Lion Foundation Transcript May 20, 2026 Webinar

Good afternoon — or good evening, for some of you — thank you for being here. I'm Ellen O'Connell, Executive Director of the Mountain Lion Foundation. Before we dive in, a few housekeeping notes. Please submit your questions throughout using the Q&A feature at the bottom of your Zoom screen — that's different from the Chat function. We'll have a dedicated Q&A at the end. Today's webinar is also being recorded, and we'll share the recording and transcript afterward.

Today you'll hear from three members of our team. First, our Board Chair Dr. John Ziegler — a physician and lifelong conservation advocate based in Park City, Utah. You'll hear from Doctor Byron Weckworth, our Chief Conservation and Advocacy Officer. Byron is a conservation biologist with a PhD from the University of Calgary and more than 2 decades of experience in wildlife research and coexistence strategy. Before joining MLF, Byron worked at Panthera where he led the snow leopard and Central Asia portfolios and founded Panthera's Conservation Genetics program And then you'll hear from Joshua Lisbon, our Director of Education and Coexistence, a mountain lion researcher, educator, and filmmaker focused on practical coexistence strategies. Joshua is also the human star of the Emmy-nominated documentary Willow, A Diary of Mountain Lion, which is streaming on PBS, and the Principal Investigator for the Grand Staircase Escalante Cougar Project in Southern Utah.

The Mountain Lion Foundation has been at the center of mountain lion conservation for four decades. From the passage of Proposition 117 — which permanently ended sport hunting of mountain lions in California — to a more recent victory: this past February, Southern and Central California mountain lions were listed as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act. MLF and the Center for Biological Diversity led the fight to make that happen — and so did every one of you who supported this work along the way. We are proud of that legacy, and we are building those strengths. But the challenges facing mountain lions are changing rapidly. Across the West, we are watching the same story play out in different places. In California, communities living at the edge of lion habitat are dealing with conflict and without the right tools and the right education, the answer too often becomes lethal extermination.

In Utah, policy decisions about mountain lion management are being shaped by fear rather than by fact. And fear breeds more fear, misinformation spreads quickly.

But these animals are not just iconic wildlife, where mountain lions move, deer population shift, vegetation recovers, watersheds stabilize, and the landscapes are more likely to be in balance. Scientists call it a trophic cascade. We call it the lion effect.

We also recognize that coexistence is not theoretical. It is real, it is complicated, it looks like a rancher in Montana choosing non-lethal deterrents over a rifle. Looks like a school in Utah teaching kids that a mountain lion's footprint means a healthy watershed. Looks like a state legislator reading the science instead of the headline. It looks like organizations like the Mountain Lion Foundation giving people practical tools that help both people and wildlife thrive. And it looks like changing policies so that it is grounded in science and not fueled by fear. But that means that we need to be able to have hard conversations with people who do not necessarily agree with us. We cannot just preach to the choir. So we're building an organization that can work across the full spectrum of stakeholders, ranchers, legislators, houndsmen, land managers, communities living alongside these animals. Our goal is not to win an argument. It is to depolarize a conversation that has been stuck in a stalemate for too long and replace that stalemate with movement and solutions.

To help develop an alternative narrative about mountain lions, one based in fact and not fear, we're preparing to launch national campaigns, including the Lion Effect and Facts Over Fear. We're doing this in partnership with one of our new board members, who has generously brought this team's full marketing and communications expertise pro bono as an extension of our own. This will allow us to reach tens of thousands and ultimately, hopefully hundreds of thousands, even millions of people with a different narrative about mountain lions.

You'll hear some more about the other work we're doing in education and coexistence from Byron and Joshua. And we know that this will not be easy, but we believe that these are solvable problems, but the window to act is now. And now let me turn it over to our board chair, Dr. John Ziegler.

John Ziegler

Thank you, Ellen. I echo Ellen's appreciation to you all for attending this webinar and spending a bit of your time with us today. I've been keenly interested in apex predator conservation for many years.. This interest dates back to the 1990s when I was a founding board member of the Vital Ground Foundation. Vital Ground is an organization which started in Hebrew, Utah. But it's now based in Missoula, Montana, focusing on protecting and connecting grizzly bear habitat in the northern Rockies. The central motto of the Vital Ground Foundation is a famous conservation quote which reads as follows: Where the grizzly walks, the earth is healthy. And I feel strongly that this quote applies equally to the mountain lion.

In 2026, the Mountain Lion Foundation marks a milestone. 40 years as one of the nation's leading voices for America's line. Since 1986, with your support, we have helped secure

landmark protections, advance science-based conservation, and reshaped how people across the country think about living alongside wildlife. That legacy belongs to the advocates, scientists, donors, volunteers, and partners who believed against all odds. The mountain lions deserve a future in the wild. Today, that work is more urgent than ever - habitat fragmentation, accelerating development, climate pressures, and political headwinds are placing unprecedented strain on mountain lion populations in the landscapes they depend on. Too often, fear-based narratives and outdated management approaches continue to drive policy, undermining solutions that can protect both people and wildlife.

When I became chair of the Mountain Lion Foundation Board of Directors last year, I recognized that a number of changes need to be made if the Mountain Lion Foundation was to be as effective as possible going forward.

The organization had become operationally challenged with the then current staff and board in place. Accordingly, I made the difficult decision to remove the entire staff and replace the executive director.

Our new executive director, Ellen O'Connell, who you've met, brings a wealth of experience and real world perspective to the role.

We also put term limits in place for the board of directors and recruited a number of new board of directors and advisory board members.

As we enter our fifth decade, the Mountain Lion Foundation is focused on increasing our impact and reach. We will continue strong advocacy and legislative engagement at the state and national levels.

Working to ensure wildlife policies grounded in sound science, ethical management, and long-term conservation outcomes.

We are also committed to supporting and translating research to inform better decision-making and more effective conservation strategies. At the same time.

We recognize that conservation is as much about people as it is about wildlife.

Equally central to our work is expanding coexistence programs that equip communities

With practical science-based tools to live safely alongside mountain lions through clear public facing materials.

Strength and education initiatives and outreach that replaces fear with understanding.

In partnership with other organizations, we are working to correct misinformation and elevate balanced fact-based narratives about mountain lions and their role in healthy ecosystems.

Going forward we will emphasize collaboration with state, federal, and local agencies to advance pragmatic conservation programs that prioritize both mountain lion conservation and public safety. Recognizing that durable, sustained solutions require partnership and trust. This next chapter is supported by new leadership

Being put in place over the past several months. Additional members of the Mountain Lion Foundation team will be added over the coming months. With new staff leadership and engaged board and an expanded high level advisory committee bringing scientific policy and regional expertise. The foundation is strengthening its capacity to lead an increasingly complex conservation landscape. This anniversary year is not only a moment to honor the past, but a call to act with urgency and purpose. With your continued support, the Mountain Lion Foundation will build on 40 years of leadership to ensure that America's lion not only survives, but flourishes for generations to come.

Thank you all for being part of this journey.

Byron Weckworth

Great, thank you, John. And I just want to start by acknowledging everyone who's taking some time out of their day to tune into us and also that this is a very verbally intensive, rich discussion that we hope to have future webinars where we're a bit more interactive and have a chance to show more of a fun graphic interface as well. But for now, what I thought I would present on following the themes that Ellen and John have already mentioned is a bit of a peek behind the curtain as it is about how we've been developing our strategy and how we want to relaunch this organization into, you know, the next chapter of our existence. And so one of the things where I'll start is just is one of the things we've been speaking a lot about and thinking about internally over the last several months is is around the question of what does an effective mountain lion conservation organization need to look like in the world we're living in today

The challenges facing lions now are increasingly interconnected. Habitat fragmentation, political pressure, conflict and public misinformation development and transportation infrastructure, changing wildlife policies from state to state. None of these things really exist in isolation anymore. And so it creates quite the wicked problem.

Our strategy at the Mountain Foundation has been really about building around this idea that durable conservation outcomes require durable systems and durable relationships.

And you may have noted my emphasis there. We can't just react to one crisis after another in real time. We have to steadily build the organizational capacity through partnerships, public support structure and the systems that are capable of addressing these challenges at landscape scales and over long time horizons.

And I want to emphasize that word build here – we are still a very small organization, and we're very aware of that. We're rebuilding thoughtfully and intentionally, strengthening our internal systems. It's been much of what we've done. There's not been a lot of outward, obviously, facing evidence of that. It's all been very internalized, but really strengthening those internal systems to allow for the recruitment of expanding expertise, to allow for the development of partnerships that are real and concentrated and focusing on where we can be most effective and most constructive. So we're not approaching this from the perspective that one organization can solve every challenge facing mountain lions overnight.

We do believe that MLF can play an increasingly important role, though, as a collaborative connector, as a science translator, and through strategic conservation partnerships as we continue to grow. And that's really a thinking behind the model we've conceptualized and the strategic pillars we're building our programming around.

And so I'd like to briefly take some time just to introduce those pillars and give you some idea of at this high level view of what it is we're thinking of developing, what we're already developing, and how we want to move forward as a national conservation organization.

So our first pillar is around science and research support

Now, we're not trying to become a university or replace, you know, all the incredible research that's already being done by scientists, agencies, and others across the country.

But there is, among them often a major gap between research being produced and how that's actually informing public understanding management decisions, policy conversations, or even conservation implementation on the ground.

So part of our role we see is helping to bridge those worlds, and not necessarily being the producers of science, but the conveyors of it and those to help move it along to the places that need to see it. So that includes supporting and elevating credible science, helping communicate ecological findings to the public, identifying research gaps where they exist, and building stronger networks between researchers, agencies at state and federal levels, land managers, other NGOs, and of course, local communities. And we're not naive. We know that science communication in itself rarely produces results, but ultimately better

conservation decisions happen when good science is made accessible, collaborative, and connected to real-world management.

So that leads into our second pillar of... around policy and advocacy. And for us, advocacy means being constructive, pragmatic, and science grounded. There are times when strong opposition is necessary, but long-term conservation cannot be built entirely through conflict. It requires relationships, credibility, sustained engagement with institutions and agencies that shape wildlife management. So we're putting a major emphasis, as John and Ellen both mentioned, on building proactive working relationships with state and federal agencies, with tribal partners, conservation organizations that operate in the same spaces, scientific institutions, and of course, again, local stakeholders. That doesn't mean that we're trying to find some consensus agreement, because we won't. But if we want durable conservation outcomes for mountains, we need to be in the room. We have to be participating seriously.

We have to bring credible science and thoughtful solutions to the table and a willingness to engage constructively even when those conversations are difficult.

And so this relationship building component is really incredibly important to where we're headed organizationally. The third pillar is around landscape connectivity and habitat conservation. Mountain lions or wide-ranging animals, you know, their long-term healthy persistence requires connected systems, not isolated, fragmented habitats. And increasingly, conservation success depends on our ability to think at those landscape scales, linking habitat, maintaining permeability across developing areas, protecting important corridors, reducing fragmentation, and identifying places where proactive conservation can still make an enormous difference before the opportunity is lost.

So, of course, there are many organizations and efforts and entities already working in this space and doing conservation at these scales. So we're not looking to be redundant or recreate them. Rather, we want to work naturally to create partnerships across the disciplines of transportation, planning land trusts, wildlife agencies, private landowners, regional conservation collaboratives, and again, local communities.

So conservation at this scale is fundamentally collaborative, and that's the only way we see it being impactful moving forward, is building those relationships and finding our space within them. And there's another layer to this conservation that I'd be remiss not to bring up. We're just beginning to think on how we could engage - and some of you may have seen this in recent news for the first time in generations, really, we're beginning to see real signs of mountain lions naturally returning to their historic range.

I mean, this has been ongoing in some ways, and the Dakotas and Nebraska and along those related river corridors, but recent confirmation of reproducing females in Minnesota and Michigan, something that hasn't happened in a century or more

It's a great reminder, a hopeful reminder that these animals possess remarkable resilience when those landscapes remain connected and ecological opportunities are existing for them. At the same time for the East, there are growing conversations around whether recovery in some regions may eventually require more active approaches like facilitated restoration through introduction. So those are complex discussions ecologically, politically, socially. And we recognize those conversations are still very much in the early stages and how we might engage in those is also still very early on but regardless of how recovery unfolds, whether that's in the East or in places in the West that we're dealing with now, one thing is clear. If mountain lions are going to return to their historic range and recover in their current range, whether naturally or through, you know, facilitated restoration efforts. Communities need to be prepared before their cats arrive, not afterwards. So that means education, outreach, trust building - coexistence planning. It all has to happen early. In many ways, coexistence is not a final stage of conservation. It's really something that we need to be prepared before cats arrive. And it makes long-term recovery possible.

So that segues to the final pillar.

And that is that really, I think, ties all of this together. It's coexistence, education, and public engagement. Ultimately, none of these goals are sustainable if public understanding continues to be driven by fear, misinformation, and polarization. The world is incredibly polarized right now in this country especially. And people need practical tools. They need trustworthy information. They need context around predator ecology, behavior, risk, coexistent strategies. Communities need support navigating the railroad situations in ways that improve public safety and conservation outcomes collectively. And importantly, we need to rebuild that cultural space for nuance. It seems to be lacking right now in our discussions. That space that we don't have to come to my side or your side, but somewhere between lies the solution. And the nuances to get there are more important to consider. So we have to find a way to build those productive conversations around carnivores. And that's the major reason we brought Joshua on the team. A lot of what we're building going forward involves creating educational systems and coexistence programming that are proactive rather than reactive work that helps communities before conflicts escalate and helps people feel informed rather than fearful.

And this is also an area where we think partnership matters enormously. We don't want to reinvent every tool, duplicate good work already happening elsewhere. Part of our role can

be helping connect people, connect programs, elevate and amplify those effective programs already on the ground, support local efforts and contribute where we can and you know add meaningful value.

So with that, I'll turn things over to Joshua Lisbon who's going to talk more specifically about some of the coexistence and education initiatives that we're beginning to develop.

Joshua.

Joshua Lisbon

Cool, thanks. Thanks, Byron.

Yeah, I'm gonna get into the weeds a little bit on some of the education work that I'm developing right now. It's going to be a lot of, like, education, public outreach, coexistence work, collaboration with agencies and organizations of different kinds to try to be successful in this.

Really, how do we lessen fear and misunderstanding and replace that with more tolerance and appreciation? And I think education is really a key to this. Like, I was looking at news this morning out of California talking about fear of mountain lions running around communities in prides, which is not how that works. And then, you know, I look at the news out of Utah, which can be very upsetting in regards to management and a lack of tolerance and coexistence there. So both of these places require thoughtful approaches, and they require some educational work there. So, we want to work in areas where cougars are recovering, so there's also news out of Minnesota, out of the Upper Peninsula where mountain lions are moving into historic territory, and we want to kind of get ahead of the curve there so that we can provide resources to people who will now be coexisting with mountain lions in their environment, and if we can provide that on the front end, then we can potentially avoid conflicts and misunderstandings, so it's a really... it's a cool opportunity to get ahead of that and be proactive. And then we need to work in areas where Cougars are struggling, like in Utah, where things really... they need some change right now, and I've been working a lot with communities there, particularly in southern Utah, to try to engage local stakeholders to offer outreach and education as best I can.

So really, we want to inspire the next generation of conservationists. So, it's a cheesy thing to harp on, but young people are the future, and they will be the decision makers. And so if we can deliver meaningful, useful, science-based educational curriculum geared towards K-12 as an audience, then, I think we can really start to make a difference. I'm working now to build K through 12 curriculum built in three age blocks. We'll have an elementary, middle school, and high school versions. This version one rollout is going to focus heavily on

ecology, biology, and management, and will scale in complexity based on the age range. So this is a collaboration with a local organization that I've worked with before called Inspired Classroom. They're based here in Missoula

Wonderful organization, definitely check them out. On the elementary end, we'll get the basics of ecology, of behavior, of mountain lions role in the environment. It'll be sort of like the introductory level. In middle school, we're going to take a bit of a deeper dive into predator-prey relationships, social organization, and coexistence. Middle school will begin to use a modeling tool that we have and that we like to use to show how natural systems work, and we have a number of examples built in there based on established research, so that students can understand, like, top-down, bottom-up systems, and how all that works.

Once we get into high school, we can get into a little higher level. We'll take deeper dives into those systems, into predator prey relationships again, and the role of cougars in the environment. And we'll start to use some modeling to explore how abundance, hunting and management impact natural systems in a really in-depth way.

The tool that we're going to use, if you can kind of picture this, not to go too deep on this one, but it's like, you have these different nodes, each of the nodes represent either some part of the environment, whether it's mountain lions or human hunting, or grasslands, you know, that support. The deer and the elk populations, and everything has an abundance level that will be tooled to be correct for the environment that we're looking at, and then once you play with the abundance levels, you will see how everything is connected and how everything affects everything else. So if you have a bad winter and lack of moisture is going to impact how much grass you have out there, well, that's going to impact your deer and your elk, and then that's going to impact your your mountain lions. And so if you put a bunch of mountain lions into the system, you'll see how that will trickle down, or if you take a bunch of mountain lions out of the system, you'll see how that'll affect things too. So we can really, you can tweak that to get an understanding of how management decisions will impact the environment.

This is work that I have done before and I've built out curriculum like this before and delivered that to students working just sort of in a small regional way. And over five years we were able to reach over 30,000 students with this. So my expectation is that we should be able to do the same through the networks that we have and then we're going to really work to expand those networks. Like, I want to get into as many classrooms as possible. To do that, this is going to be free for teachers. This is going to be really plug and play. We want this to be something additive to their environment, something really easy. There's going to be a lot of hand holding. We don't want teachers are stressed. They got too much going on, and they're just burdened, so we don't want to be like, here's this thing, and it's

hard to use, and it's complicated, and then they feel burdened. We want it to be something that, like, eases their experience in the classroom, offers them something rich and interactive and is interesting for students, because I think about my classroom experience as a young person, and often it was not the most interesting thing. So if we can do something to really get students engaged and provide them good, like, science-based education, then that's a win.

I also think this will be a really good resource for rural and underserved populations because often the resources there are not abundant, and this is something that we can really improve their classroom experience as well. We'll do live days also, which will bring me directly into their classroom. There will be field trips, of course, for local students that I can get to and I can meet them in the field and we can do direct education that way. But for students who are far afield, I can get beamed into their classroom and we can work on the curriculum pieces together. And then eventually version two is going to involve more place-based storytelling and direct involvement with monitoring projects as we get those up and running so that students can get like updates from the field about what's going on and be more involved in any research or monitoring projects.

So that's that part. And then we did, Ellen was kind enough to mention the film earlier. So I do have Willow, Diary of a Mountain Lion available and PBS is kind enough to allow me to use that as an educational tool. And so I'm setting up a lot of talks and a lot of film showings right now to use that as an engagement tool to bring the life of Willow, a most remarkable mountain lion, to people and use that as a touchstone for conversation and then education. I've been giving talks, panel discussions, presentations, and we'll continue to show the film throughout certainly Montana, where I am, and then farther afield as well. And so it's a really good opportunity to get the word out. We'll be also tabling, doing local events, things like that, and traveling to do that as well.

Byron mentioned working with universities, and so we're interested in creating some monitoring projects that will give students field skills, fulfill internship requirements for them for graduation. And then it offers two a learning opportunity where students can practice science communication so they can be involved in the education end as well because often, if you spend a lot of time researching stuff, you don't always know how to explain that to people. And so being able to communicate your science in a way that is impactful and digestible to a lay audience is super important. So if we can help university students get that skill, that's also really valuable. And then Byron mentioned to community collaboration. So we'll be producing a lot of materials to distribute those. We're going to work with a lot of other organizations to amplify both our message and their message to be more effective with education, outreach, coexistence and moving the needle on

management to science-based and very reasonable. And then we're excited, too, to be able to work with state agencies to be responsive to conflict where that's needed to offer tools for that and to get ahead of potential conflicts through education and coexistence strategies

Did we just lose Joshua?

Yeah.

If you did mention thunderstorms overhead, so there's a good chance he had a power outage.

Okay.

Why don't I take a couple of questions, hopefully he'll get back. One question that someone just asked is someone asked about are we doing anything and taking action to stop the killing of cougars in Utah and what can others like my nonprofit do to help cougars in Utah?

The answer is yes, we've been focusing a lot on Utah because of the issues in Utah, Byron or John, do you want to talk a little bit more specifically

John Ziegler is in Utah, so that we've spent a lot of time. We were all out there a couple of weeks ago, and that is what we're calling Ground Zero for mountain lion.

Yeah, sure. Thanks, Ellen. Good question.

Utah is probably ground zero for the harshest, most severe cougar, quote, management policies of any of the Western U.S. states

There's legislation in place that basically for a minimal fee of a of a entry level hunting license you can hunt cougar with no limits and no time limits, 365 days a year. And you can use essentially any any method to to capture and kill the animal. That is passed by the legislator HB 469 went into effect May 2023. And there's other situations like the Predator Management Study going on in six of the 30, 31 hunting units in the state where professional hunters and trappers are being brought in to eradicate cougars to see the result on the on the mule deer population. I happen to be a member of the Regional Advisory Council for the Wildlife, Central Regional Advisory Council for the Wildlife Board for the state of Utah. And I am regularly recommending and advocating and suggesting that we have a much more gentle, much more quote science-based approach to, to our cougar management. There's a handful of other people with a similar perspective as I have on these regional advisory councils of which there are 5 in the State so it is an uphill battle, but we are preparing to take it on. We have some of our board members have a talent set

that gives us optimism that we'll be able to have an effect. But it is a very difficult state right now. And I appreciate the question.

Joshua, we just filled in while you came back, so keep going.

Yeah, sorry about that, everybody. I had a thunderstorm roll through and I was like, I hope I don't lose power. And then I heard a transformer blow up in my neighborhood. Nice loud pop and everything just went dark. So I'm on a hotspot, but I think I'm back.

We're gonna launch into more Q&A, and and please use the Q&A feature to get that to us, and so to give you an opportunity to do that, we're going to show you a video.

A couple of questions. I think one that came in, I think when you were talking, Joshua, can you explain what abundance hunting means?

Did you use that term?

Oh, I'm not sure. I didn't mean to lump those two things together. I think we were talking about like maybe I... maybe I crushed them together somehow, but I wasn't trying to make that a term. Like we were talking about like abundance of something else, maybe, like, with the nodes in the... in the matrix, like, they have values of abundance, so you can increase, like, in that, like, the easy thing would be to, like, say, like, in this given ecosystem, there are seven mountain lions or something, so that's, like, the level of abundance, and then if we bring in like, either human hunters into that system that are going after cats that would bring the number down, or if we bring human hunters into the system that bring down the number of deer and elk, that would change things too. So you're in that modeling year, playing with values of abundance of either grass or water or deer or elk, or whatever it is that you want to bring in as part of that web of life and then all of the connections are reflected by how you change the abundance. So I think that's probably how that got mashed up. So sorry about that

Byron, I'm gonna put this one to you. There's a question about what's happening in Northern California and their fear that mountain lions are becoming dangerous. We've been spending a lot of time talking about this and talking to some of the sheriffs in different regions.

I guess Byron and John, maybe one of you wants to talk about what's happening in this situation.

Byron Weckworth

Yeah, I think this is a great example of where education could be key. There's this idea that if the balance are only active at night, so that if we see them during the day, something

weird must be going somehow that the animal has changed. And that's not true. Mountain lions are active throughout the day. You see them hunting in the daytime and hunting at night. Certainly, the research suggests that they're most active during the sort of dawn to dusk period, but that doesn't mean they're only active. So I think there's some just like, let's understand that maybe a lot of these sightings are not abnormal, but just the fact that people are seeing these animals in ways they don't really identify as being natural, but they are. There's another thing, more people are seeing them on their doorbell cameras and security cameras, and that's not a product of their necessarily being more cats, it's a product of us just being more vigilant and having more eyes out there watching and seeing things. It's likely that the cats that are visiting people's yards and doors and things have been doing that forever, and they just never knew it until they got a camera. And so, that's not to say... so, in many ways, these cats have been coexisting with people without them even knowing it and that's not to say there's no problems and all this can be dismissed as normal or already happening. Certainly, and this is where we just don't understand Why? But there does seem to be a validated increase of conflict and overlapping of people and cats and space and time and some might contribute that to they've lost their fear of people, whatever that is. Fear is a human construct, so however the mountain lion might feel fear. We don't really know. And there's certainly a case to be made for that, and to do the research to better understand that.

In the meantime, just not knowing doesn't, again, invalidate the fact that this is a real concern and that people are scared and because they don't understand. And there are cases where there are, you know, there's increased fear of attacks and all that, so an increased taking of pets and livestock and those are all real things we have to acknowledge and want to find solutions to. And so I think that's, you know, we're just really starting to scratch the surface of how to do that. Again, it's nothing as I was speaking about, it's nothing we're going to do on our own. And so we're building that network out of partners in California working with local law enforcement, working with CD. I saw someone ask a CDFW. Yeah, try and develop those relationships and figure out what broad-scale approach to bring to these landscapes to, one, understand what's happening, why there's this increase in conflict, to combat the fear with knowledge and tools to help people feel safer and help protect their animals, and move all that forward. It's an extremely volatile situation. And it's going to be difficult. And so we're trying to move forward carefully, intentionally, but with clear priority and funding some resolution.

John Zieger

Yeah, I'll add a little something to that too, in that

When situations come to our attention, such as what's going on in El Dorado County and Santa Barbara County. I believe it's what Lassen County in California, we're being proactive. Historically, some of the law enforcement folks and wildlife management folks out in California have specifically told us that the reputation of Mountain Lion Foundation was a bit challenging. And they didn't think that we were looking to be collaborative and helpful colleagues and partners. That has changed. Going forward, we actually proactively reach out to these jurisdictions. Talk to the people who are boots on the ground, who are making the rules and regs. For example, the sheriff in El Dorado County, we have spoken with him a couple times and are in the process of scheduling a visit with him and his team. And to meet with any of the powers that be in the county and let them know that we are here to help and to offer helpful solutions.

Because it is not a good situation. And they recognized that, and they were very receptive to our contacting them. So, good, good question. We are on top of it.

There's a question about SB 1135. It includes some language concerning wolves. Do you think it will also help mountain lions? Byron, we've been working on that. I'm going to let you take that as well.

Byron Weckworth

No, I mean, that's a great question. And there's another bill that was out specific to El Dorado County. Around specifically mountain lion coexistence and research work that it would be nice to see those bills combined. But I think that they get to the point of the question is wildlife conflict in and of itself is there's a lot of commonalities, especially when we're talking about predators. So it's the fear and the concerns and the real issues on the ground are that either these animals are taking people's livestock or pets. So this this there's always fear around human casualties and injuries. But a lot of it's around livestock industry. And again, it's there's a real affection on the ground. I think any coexistence programming that helps generate partnership and goodwill, education and finding tools to find ways to coexist, whether it be through funds to pay ranchers for losses, whether it's providing tools to prevent the conflict in the first place. Those all have bleed over across multiple species. A lot of this... the approaches that will help combat depredation by wolves can be used or modified to be helpful for depredations with malines and such.

So... so... so indirectly, yes. efforts and programming around combating conflicts with wolves can help mountain lions, but even more so, we hope that as... that if a bill, SB 1135 does pass, and importantly to that is fully funded, just passing's not enough, it has to be funded that that will develop statewide coexistence programming around, especially these carnivores that are controversial, and that will include mountain lion coexistence

education and tools as well. So, yeah, so a big part of that bill is focused on wolves but there, I think there's more broad programming within that that will be both directly and indirectly useful for mountain lions.

There's a question that connects to that. It seems like there are similar issues, human animal conflict, misperceptions with wolves. Are we working with any organizations working with wolf coyote coexistence?

Ellen O'Connell

And the answer is yes, we're partnering. We're on a lot of coalition groups, particularly in California. There's a wildlife coalition group that we work with. We had a really, really wonderful conversation today with People in Carnivores in Montana about working together. So we're really trying to... it's exactly right. The issues are really similar with all predators, and so more we can do together, and we have in the past, Mountain Lion Foundation has done, you know, materials and coexistence and some of the work that Joshua is going to do in Montana. We're going to invite other people to be a part of so we can reach as many people as possible.

There's a couple of questions, I guess either Josh or Byron, maybe, is electric fencing effective at deterring mountain lions? Is it effective at deterring grizzlies and black bears?

Joshua, if you have some thoughts, go for it. I don't want to

It better be tall

Mountain lions have the ability to jump pretty high, and so they can get over stuff very well. So the fencing that works really well for bears doesn't need to be very high and it's super effective because if they just lumber into it. It deters them. So, mountain lions' ability to jump over things means they have an ability to avoid a deterrent like that, so you could electrify something, certainly, and that would be a deterrent to anything but with mountain lions, it seems to be either, like, you need something tall or you need something enclosed, so that they can't just get up and over and into, like, wherever your chickens or your sheep or whatever it is. Like bringing livestock in into a barn or something in the evenings, just or guardian dogs are amazing. They do a wonderful job, too. So there are certainly deterrents that work, and that one could work, but I just worry, like, if you've got your, like, little shorty fence for keeping your goats contained or something, cat's just gonna jump over it.

There's a question about whether we have any plans to give students a chance to see lions in person, because when people see them up close and personal, they seem to take a special interest in them.

Ellen O'Connell

I think, you know, not just students, but people in general, we've been talking about ways that we can, you know.

Many people work with mountain lions who haven't seen a mountain lion in the wild. They are... they're pretty elusive, so it is hard. Joshua works down in southern Utah, has been working with people down there, and has all those video cameras that are taking the amazing videos that everybody saw. So Joshua Byron, do you want to talk a little bit about what we might or might not be able to do.

Joshua Lisbon

Gosh, it's so challenging. Like if you can get to like a rehabilitation center or a zoo or something like that, then you have a really like clear and easy opportunity to see these animals up close and personal. But even bringing anyone into the field, it's really...not a guarantee. They're incredibly elusive, they may... or maybe, depending on, like, again hunting pressure, things like that, they may just be solely active at night, which makes that even harder. So what we would like to do is get students into the field. I can teach a lot of tracking, I can bring, you know, students of - you know, depending on the age range, certainly college students and high school students and maybe younger into the field to, like, check cameras, follow tracks, learn about sampling. If we have, like, cameras set up, and then we go to those, and we pull the footage, and the students, they've been there in the environment, and then they see cats on the imagery, like, we can offer things like that. My hope is to try to get people into the field, because connecting them to the environment and to the animals... and it's a great opportunity to just teach and talk and really it engages people on a really beautiful level. So I want to do that, but it is very hard to be like, we're going to go find a cat because they're so elusive.

Great. There's a easy question. What's the name of the California Wildlife Coalition Group? And it's called the California Wildlife Network.

And it's a group of all the people working in really important issues in that area.

There's a question about whether or not the California fires have had any impact on mountain lions.

John Ziegler

Well, I'm not the science guy, but I can tell you that, yes, the California fires have had an effect on mountain lions

And one example is in El Dorado County, where some of the higher elevation burn over 200,000 acres burned. And it's pretty well recognized that that drove the deer and following then the mountain lions down to the lower elevations.

So that's one example of how the fires in California had a clear effect on mountain lions.

Byron Weckworth

Yeah, I would just add to that real quick that I think it's one of those really important research projects that we would look to want to support or help out some get going is understand because fires burn at different intensities, different sizes, and so as you network that across the state, there's going to be different effects in different places. And then as those burned areas recover and provide better forage and more deer, like, how does that affect, I think, yeah, just getting at what John was saying is to better understand how that has contributed to problems and how do we manage those areas for both not just the lines, but also the primary prey species and their distributions that could provide some insight to help explain some of what's going on. Yeah, so it's another one of those big, big questions that are still out there, not fully understood.

There's a question. This is focused, Joshua, for you. Have you focused on schools with cougars as mascots before I give it to you, I'd say we have been talking a lot about not only schools with cougars as mascots, but also sports teams and what we might be able to do with sports teams.

They're all over the place, so... Joshua, have you thought about that at all?

Joshua Lisbon

I... yeah, I haven't specifically honed in on them, but I do love that. And I should point out too that in a stroke of amazing irony. BYU, that is supporting the WRI 7707 study, which is eliminating mountain lions from 18% of Utah. Their mascot is the cougar, so that's... that's a strange one.

I know we're getting close to time. There's a question about public lands, which include wildlife are being destroyed and killed. And do we have tactics to stop that? I think that's really at the core, in many ways at the core of what we have been talking about in terms of changing policy and making sure that we can protect the lands that we have - National parks even that are threatened. And some of the national campaigns that we're doing, which we'll dovetail with some policy work behind the scenes policy work we'll... we'll look at that. You know, it's... this is a particularly difficult moment for conservation in the United States. But yeah, that is definitely something that we have been working on, and a big part of our messaging campaign that we mentioned before

We've got about one more minute.

Let's see, do we have a relationship with the California Fish and Wildlife and California State Park? Byron or Joshua in particular, but we have relationships with a lot of the agencies, and we've been in California for for many, many years. That's where we started. We have deep roots there.

Ellen O'Connell

I think I've covered most of the questions. Some of them are comments. We can go through some of these these questions if we didn't answer them and try to get back to you. And also, as John said, please feel free to reach out to me or to the [info@mountainlion.org](mailto:info@mountainlion.org), which we monitor, and we are happy to have any of the people on this call are happy to hop on a call with anyone, answer questions.

You know, and just see what your perspective is from where you're coming from. So I cannot thank you enough for joining us tonight.

It really means a lot that you took this much time out of your night. It's an important moment for mountain lions and for wildlife conservation just generally in the US, and the decisions being made today and across the country right now are going to shape the future of these animals and landscapes for generations to come. We... I think this is a pretty optimistic group of people. We believe there's a real opportunity to help move that conversation to a more science-based, constructive, and hopeful direction. And we're really glad that you're hopefully still along for the ride after you listen to us tonight. And we want to, you know, remain connected to the people who care about this work, and always happy to hear from all of you. So, thank you again, and

Thank you for believing in America's lions.

Yeah, thank you, everyone.

Yeah, thank you. And please, if you do have questions, I'm happy to answer them.

Do send us some emails.

Thanks so much.

Thanks, everyone