

## Cougar policies working

HB 2624

It's not a normal session of the Oregon Legislature without bills that would loosen or reverse laws that limit hunting for cougars and bears. Normality arrived in Salem this week with a legislative hearing on proposals to open loopholes in the restrictions voters approved in 1994 and reaffirmed two years later. Lawmakers should reject the proposals, as they have done in previous sessions.

The 1994 initiative bans the use of bait in hunting bears and prohibits using dogs to hunt cougars. Hunting both kinds of animals by other means still is allowed; in fact the number of cougars killed each year now surpasses pre-1994 levels. It's also legal to bait bears or use dogs to hunt cougars if the animals present a threat to livestock or humans.

The initiative has had some counterintuitive effects, particularly on cougar populations. The number of cougars is believed to have increased in Oregon, yet the number of complaints about the animals has declined more than 70 percent from its peak in 1999.

One reason is that before 1994, sport hunters using dogs took the biggest cougars as trophies. Today, the first cougars to be hunted are those that cause problems for humans. Improved survival of dominant cats results in more stable cougar territories and greater rates of reproduction, while culling cougars that stray near towns or ranches leads to a reduction in complaints.

Yet this successful approach to wildlife management is continually being challenged. House Bill 2624 would allow counties to opt out of the 1994 ban. House Bill 3395 would allow the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to establish a pilot program for hunting cougars with dogs and allow counties to opt into the program. Both bills would allow a return to cougar trophy hunting in many parts of Oregon, which is precisely what voters intended to stop.

The best argument for the bills is that in 1994, urban Oregon imposed its will on rural parts of the state. A rancher has a different perspective on cougars than a suburbanite. But without evidence that allowable methods of cougar management have failed, the case for change remains weak.

The least convincing argument is that Oregon should allow the use of dogs to hunt cougars before a child is hurt or killed. By that reasoning, Oregon should declare open season on all potentially dangerous animals — including dogs and horses, which unlike cougars have caused injury. With cougar complaints sharply down, concerns for human safety support keeping the 1994 rules in place.

Oregon's cougar management practices are working. The Legislature should leave them alone.

From the Desk of  
Representative  
David Gornberg

