

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: February 13, 2019

Agenda Item: Mountain Lion Strategy

Division: Wildlife **Action Needed:** Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 30 Minutes

Background: Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) is committed to maintaining sustainable lion populations in all suitable habitats of our state. Over the last 25 years, FWP has made significant investments in field research that helps inform our lion management. With this and other research, we propose to use the latest science and state-of-the-art methods to monitor Montana's lions. FWP has completed a final draft of *Montana Mountain Lion Management Strategy* for the commission's approval as an important component of lion management. A copy has been provided to the commission.

We know lion populations function in big landscapes, so our approach includes defining four *Lion Ecoregions*, large landscapes of similar habitat where populations perform similarly. FWP will periodically develop estimates of lion numbers within the northwest, west-central, and southwest ecoregions using a relatively new but well-proven genetically-based field sampling method known as *Spatial Capture-Recapture*, or SCR to estimate populations. Using these estimates plus our understanding of lion ecology and lion harvest data, managers will employ a sophisticated statistical model known as an *Integrated Population Model*, or IPM, that integrates all the information to predict the effects of lion harvest on populations. Over time, this monitoring program will reduce uncertainty about the effects of lion harvest and improve FWP's ability to meet management objectives.

Determining those management objectives is the next and separate step in our process. Regardless of whether the Strategy, or a modified form of it is adopted, FWP will reach out to anyone with an interest in lion management – hunters, houndsmen, wildlife viewers, livestock producers, and others – through various venues to include public meetings, social media, etc., to help develop management objectives. As stated in the Strategy, “FWP and the public will collectively evaluate an ecoregion's monitoring data, develop objectives, and decide on an overall management harvest prescription for the ecoregion. Managers will then recommend individual lion management unit harvests that implement the prescription, distribute hunter effort, and address local concerns.”

Based on public comment, this final draft differs from the previous in that it further clarifies the specific responsibilities and authorities of the Fish and Wildlife Commission relative to lion management. Also, due to a preponderance of public comment relative to the proposed Model Harvest Regulations, specifically the proposed elimination of the “hybrid season” type, those Model Regulations were eliminated from the Strategy.

Public Involvement Process & Results: Jay Kolbe, the FWP biologist who wrote the Strategy, went around the state and made 12 presentations to sportsmen's groups, hound handlers, and others regarding the draft. The public comment period on the draft ran from Oct. 17, 2018 to Jan. 15, 2019 and we received 228 written comments. The most common comment generally objected to killing lions or hunting with dogs; most of these commenters live in other states. Other input regarded reducing lion numbers, wolves, CWD, or advocated specific lion management objectives, all of which are outside the scope of the Strategy. A significant portion of the comment simply supported the Strategy. The predominant substantive comment concerned various harvest season structure types— some commenters advocated for a specific season type (ie. the “hybrid” season) while others urged FWP to eliminate all reference to season structure from the draft.

Alternatives and Analysis: The alternative to implementing this Strategy is to have no contemporary strategy. This would result in less clear priorities and more difficult communications and outreach on mountain lion conservation.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale:

FWP recommends the commission adopt the final draft of the Montana Mountain Lion Monitoring and Management Strategy.

Proposed Motion:

I move the commission adopt the Montana Mountain Lion Monitoring and Management Strategy as presented by FWP.