

# Outdoor Recreation

## The boom in the cougar population



**THE OUTDOOR COLUMN**  
By Todd Arriola

In stark contrast to the Gray Wolf/Greater Sage-Grouse/Virtually Take Your Pick debates, pouring through details related to cougars and cougar management in Oregon has led me to this singular opinion, if I were forced to only express the one: there are thousands of cougars in Oregon, and miraculously reaching the total Zone Mortality Quotas (ZMQ) this year, which is encouraged—challenged, rather—by the State, wouldn't harm the population one bit.

That may very well be a broad generalization, however, to me, one of the most noticeable indications of that, as far as cougars are concerned, is the total ZMQ of 970 this year, representing an increase of roughly 25% above 2015's total quota of 777.

This year's total ZMQ was the first change in that number since 2006 (the first year of the Cougar Management Plan), when it was increased from 580 to 777, according to Or-

gon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) information.

The only areas in the last decade where the ZMQ has either been reportedly reached or exceeded have been: the Coast/North Cascade zone, at 120 in 2011, 120

in 2012, and, 130 in 2013 (with a ZMQ of 120 then); and, the Columbia Basin zone, at 42 in 2005 (with a ZMQ of 19 then).

All of the zones—Coast/North Cascade, Southwest Cascade, Southeast Cascade, Columbia Basin, Blue Mountains, and, Southeast Oregon—remain open, as of January 15th, but, it is possible, though, unlikely, that any of the zones could have reached their ZMQ. It always pays to check with ODFW first.

The fact that a hunter is allowed two cougar tags per year (no spotted kittens, or, females with spotted kittens), with the season running year long (or until ZMQs have been met, whichever occurs first), should be an encouraging component in the quest to find, and, harvest this clever mammal. However, there are a couple of issues affecting the potential for a successful hunt to begin with.

Since cougars are classified as big game mammals

in Oregon, and, not predators, as far as hunting regulations are concerned, they can only be hunted from ½ hour before sunrise, to ½ hour after sunset.

Personally, this may not currently prove to be much of an issue for me, since it should be noted that cougars have extraordinary vision, and, are both nocturnal and crepuscular hunters (active during the twilight hours of dawn and dusk). In other words, I may not be so quick to volunteer to hunt them at night anyway.

Another issue involves the method one chooses in order to hunt cougars. Currently, the regulations handbook has a simple statement, courtesy of Measure 18, the Oregon Ban on Baited Bear Hunting and Cougar Hunting with Dogs Act, passed by Oregonian voters in 1994: “No person shall use dogs for taking or pursuit of cougar.”

The most obvious problem with that is, dogs are the most effective method for hunting cougars and, “Most cougar are taken when hunters are pursuing other species,” according to ODFW. There are bills in the works, which may allow individual Counties to decide whether dogs are allowed, and one can become an “agent” for ODFW, using dogs for cougar hunting (ODFW does, while the public inexplicably cannot), but, most people are stuck with the no-dog rule for now.

The State isn't slated to run out of cougars any

time soon, since it's estimated that there are around 6,000, of them, with 4,000 of those estimated to be adults, according to ODFW.

Research conducted by ODFW has noted effects on prey, a cougar's favorite being deer and elk, including fawns and calves.

Among other points, in northeast Oregon, ODFW discovered that, on average, an adult cougar kills one deer or elk per week; high levels of hunter harvest can reduce local cougar populations; and, benefits of target areas can last for years.

Removing a total of 291 cougars (this doesn't include ones taken by hunters or on damage complaints) from the target areas including the Heppner, Steens Mountain, Ukiah, Warner, and, Wenaha Wildlife Management Units (WMU) has resulted in the most dramatic results in the Heppner and Ukiah units: elk calf survival has doubled; the Ukiah elk population has grown by 500 since 2010; and, the Heppner elk population has grown by 2,200 since 2007, according to ODFW.

What cougar hunting may look like in the future, I can't say, but in my humble opinion, having effective methods, even controversial ones (isn't everything controversial in Oregon?) at one's disposal, in order to hunt predators with an increased chance of success, makes more sense than removing those tools. Period...

## NRAC

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

Harvey provided those present with an update regarding the overall coordination process between the County and State and Federal agencies. He said that meetings with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) are going well, as well as the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF), and the United States Forest Service (USFS).

He said that BLM and ODFW are addressing feed site issues in the Auburn area together, and ODFW and ODF are working well together on logging projects, including the Pilcher Creek area.

Harvey said that the East Face project meetings and planning are going well, with the La Grande District USFS.

Copies of the five-page Water and Water Rights proposed section were handed out to the Committee for review and further editing, followed by an initial discussion about some technical and language changes, by Jan Kerns, who was instrumental in drafting the section.

Language changes and other details were further discussed among the group, and Bruland asked for a motion to approve the Water and Water Rights section.

The section was approved by the NRAC for recommendation to the County Board of Commis-

sioners for adoption into the County's Natural Resources Plan (NRP), with a motion from Justus, and a second from Fleming.

The Board will vote whether to adopt the section as part of the NRP as recommended by the NRAC, at a future, regular Commission session, the first of which will be held on Wednesday, February 3, 2016, at 9 a.m., in the Commission Chambers.

Defrees began a discussion about a 2015 Baker County Wildfire Analysis. “The purpose of this document is to brief the Baker County Natural Resource Advisory Committee (BCNRAC) members on the issues regarding the catastrophic wildfires that burned in Baker County in 2015. This document is produced by the Forestry subcommittee of BCNRAC to assist members reviewing the Wildfire section of the Natural Resource Plan,” according to the document.

This document, not meant to be a part of the NRP, Defrees said, includes details about background information, a section about lessons learned, problems, and challenges, conclusions, and, short- and long-term recommendations.

Among the lessons learned, problems, and, challenges: excessive fuel loads; slow decisions, or, no decision, or, bad decision making in federal agency leadership; federal agencies lack skill at coordinating with other agencies; wrong incentives/central planning process/big business; lack of logging crews and federal infrastructure; environmental bureaucracy; equipment

underutilized; and, the philosophy that fires are “good and natural.”

A lengthy discussion followed this topic, regarding timeframes for federal (BLM or USFS) approval of mining Plans of Operation (POO).

The discussion was related to whether the following paragraph, in the Mining section of the NRP, should be amended or left as-is:

“It is the policy of Baker County that approval of locatable minerals Plans of Operation by federal land management agencies must take place within one year from submittal of a complete plan. Baker County must be kept informed if this timeframe cannot be met and the County must be provided the reasons for the delay.”

The mining section has been a subject of considerable debate, chiefly between Anderson and Alexander with Anderson pushing for a quicker, more streamlined approval process as he commented about the overreaching authority of the agencies, and, the need to mine, and, provide employment, while Alexander has spoken about the laws and regulations that have to be followed, the length of time necessary for approvals, and, the difficulties having a POO approved. Alexander included the following in a document, meant to be a guide about the timeframes for approvals:

Alexander said, “I suggest that putting the agencies on notice that they have one year to complete the environmental analysis, and having them report back to the County if they

have not completed their work, is the best we can hope for under current laws and regulations. I suggest the mining section of the NRAC Plan (NRP) not be revised.”

A motion was made by Long to keep the Mining section as-is, and Braswell seconded that motion. The motion passed with a majority vote.

McQuisten, and (Ken) Alexander provided comments during the final Public Participation segment of the meeting.

Among other points, McQuisten stated he hadn't attended an NRAC meeting before, he agrees with Anderson's opinions, he said he plans to continue learning more about Federal agencies' roles and authorities, and, he thinks Apache County, Arizona has provided a good model regarding mining issues, and the County's role.

Alexander said he's been attempting to form solutions to the Federal government's tendency to ignore its own regulations and timeframes with POO approvals, etc., while avoiding litigation with those agencies.

Havey said he'd gather more details related the issue, with the ultimate goal of holding the agencies accountable for their own regulations and timeframes.

Bruland informed the group that the next NRAC meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, February 23, 2016, at 3 p.m., in the Commission Chambers.

The agenda will tentatively include guest speaker Matt Kerns, and, a discussion regarding the Wildfire section of the NRP.

## Hunt results due by Jan. 31

SALEM, Ore.—Any hunter who purchased 2015 big game or turkey tags needs to report their hunt results by the deadline, which is Jan. 31, 2016 for most tags.

Hunters are required to report on each deer, elk, cougar, bear, pronghorn and turkey tag purchased—even if they were not successful or did not hunt. Sports Pac license holders need to report on each big game or turkey tag issued.

Hunters have two ways to report:

Online via [reportmyhunt.com](http://reportmyhunt.com) or [www.odfw.com](http://www.odfw.com). Hunters without Internet access who wish to report online can visit an ODFW office with a computer available for Hunter Reporting (ODFW field or regional offices in Adair Village/Corvallis, Bend, Clackamas, La Grande, Portland-Sauvie Island, Roseburg, Salem Headquarters, Springfield, Tillamook.)

By telephone: Call 1-866-947-6339 to talk to a customer service representative. Hours: 6 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. Pacific Time, seven days a week.

Reporting deadlines are:

Jan. 31, 2016 for all 2015 hunts that end by Dec. 31, 2015

April 15, 2016 for all 2015 hunts that end between Jan. 1- March 31, 2016

Hunters need the following pieces of information to report, which takes just a couple of minutes:

Hunter/Angler ID number (located on ODFW licenses, tags and applications; this is a permanent number that stays the same from year-to-year)

The two digit Wildlife Management Unit (WMU) number of the Unit you hunted in most and the Unit you harvested an animal in if successful (see pages 78-79 of 2015 Big Game Regulations or Hunting Unit Maps webpage).

The total number of days hunted (including mentoring youth), the number of days hunted in the WMU hunted most, and the number of days hunted in the WMU you harvested an animal in if successful.

**\$25 penalty for not reporting deer and elk tags**

Hunters who fail to report 2015 deer or elk tags on time will be penalized \$25 when they purchase a 2017 hunting license. This penalty is assessed once, regardless of the number of unreported tags.

As of Jan. 6, 2016, about 50% of elk tags, 48% of buck deer tags and 60% of antlerless deer tags had been reported.

“The information hunters provide is used when setting controlled hunt tag numbers and hunting seasons,” said ODFW Ggame Program Manager Tom Thornton. “We really appreciate hunters taking a few minutes of their time to complete the report.”

ODFW used to get this data through phone surveys but these became more difficult and expensive as hunters moved or screened their calls. The mandatory reporting program was put in place in 2007 so these calls could be phased out.

A penalty of \$25 was added three years ago because even after several years promoting the program and providing incentives to report, only about 40 percent of tags were being reported on time. This rate was too low to for ODFW to even use the data.

After the penalty was implemented for 2012 tags, rates jumped to 80 percent or more. This has allowed ODFW to phase out its big game survey calls; the agency no longer makes these calls.

**Chance to win special big game tag**

Hunters who report on time are entered into a drawing to win a special big game tag. ODFW selects three names each year and the winners can choose a deer, elk or pronghorn tag. Hunters who win may hunt in an expanded hunt area and during an extended season, similar to auction and raffle tags that hunters can pay thousands for.

## Burns man cited for having skulls



Submitted Photo.

A Burns man illegally possessed “game parts.”

On January 21, 2016, at approximately 12:15 p.m. an OSP Fish and Wildlife trooper received an anonymous game complaint originating in the Burns area regarding a person to be in possession of multiple trophy mule deer. OSP Fish and Wildlife troopers contacted, Jaden Simpson, age 19, from Burns, and learned that he was in possession of four (4) trophy buck skulls.

OSP Fish and Wildlife troopers seized the four trophy buck skulls. SIMPSON was criminally cited for four (4) counts of Illegal Possession of Game Parts-Mule Deer Skulls and other wildlife charges will be forwarded to the Harney County District Attorney's Office for consideration.

OSP Fish and Wildlife troopers were assisted by OSP Patrol Division troopers with the investigation.