

In Washington state, hounds could chase cougars

Bill would allow training

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

OLYMPIA, Wash. — A Washington state lawmaker says he will introduce a bill authorizing hound hunters to practice chasing cougars.

House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee Chairman Brian Blake said he wants hound hunters, who track troublesome cougars for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, to stay sharp and at the same time make the big cats fear humans and dogs.

“The hope is that cougars would learn to avoid humans and dogs. They may hear a Chihuahua yapping and decide to go somewhere else,” said Blake, D-Aberdeen. “They wouldn’t be allowed to hunt cougars. They’d be allowed



Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

Could hounds scare cougars?

to train their dogs so they’d be available for the department.”

Washington voters in 1996 banned using hounds to hunt for cougars, as well as black bears, bobcats and lynxes. Fish and Wildlife, however, still

relies on houndsmen to tree and dispatch cougars that are killing domestic animals or threatening public safety.

Fish and Wildlife called on a hound hunter to quickly track down the healthy cougar that

killed a 32-year-old mountain biker in May east of Seattle. The cyclist was the first person killed in the U.S. by a cougar since a 55-year-old man was killed in 2008 in New Mexico. In September, a 55-year-old woman was killed by a cougar in the Mount Hood National Forest in Oregon.

Fish and Wildlife calculates there are 2,300 adult cougars in Washington state, plus another 1,050 kittens. Blake said he believes there are more cougars. Other rural lawmakers also say they’ve been hearing from constituents who are seeing more cougars. In Kelso, a middle school football game was canceled because a cougar was reported near the school.

In response, Fish and Wildlife held several public meetings in southwest Washington this fall. A meeting in Stevenson on protecting livestock, pets and humans drew about 35 people.

“I think the cats are getting more brazen,” Klickitat County rancher Keith Kreps said Wednesday. “They’re getting thick.”

Kreps has urged lawmakers to loosen the prohibition on using hounds to pursue cougars in a handful of counties, including Klickitat County.

“We’ve talked until we’re blue in the face,” he said. “I’m all for at least getting (hound handlers) out there in the woods to tree them.”

Wildlife biologists say counting cougars is impossible. Studies suggest, however, that there are an average of 2.2 adult cougars per about 39 square miles of habitat. Cougars can be found throughout Washington state, except in bigger cities and large tracts of Eastern Washington farmland, according to Fish and Wildlife.

Fish and Wildlife doesn’t know whether the cougar population is actually increasing,

or it’s just public perception, Assistant Director for Wildlife Eric Gardner said.

“We don’t have a great way to answer that directly,” he said. “If you’re near deer, it’s probably reasonable to think there are more cougars.”

Fish and Wildlife estimates there are 2,000 adult cougars inhabiting land under the state’s jurisdiction. The other cougars are on tribal land or in national parks. The department says 12 to 16 percent could be harvested each year without reducing the population. Hunters are taking less than 10 percent, according to the department.

That doesn’t necessarily mean the population is growing, Gardner told the agriculture committee at a meeting Tuesday.

“Cougars for the most part auto-regulate their numbers. They’re territorial. They’re prey dependent,” he said. “There’s only so much space.”

Brown proposes big funding boost for Oregon State Police

Budget has 50 more troopers

By AUBREY WIEBER
Capital Bureau

For 26 years, Travis Hampton worked out of patrol offices for the Oregon State Police. Year after year, he saw calls and car accidents increase as the disparity between the population and number of troopers grew.

Sitting in those offices, he thought about the work he would do if he ever climbed to the top of the ranks.

“I always made myself the promise that if I were ever in this position, I would make sure that citizens and legislators knew the dire straits we’re in,” Hampton said.

Hampton is no longer in a patrol post. As Oregon State Police superintendent, he’s fulfilled that promise.

Gov. Kate Brown is proposing filling 50 trooper positions in the next state budget that goes into effect in July.

That would be the biggest expansion of the state patrol in recent years. Hampton said that could be the difference in whether a trooper is on shift when you crash your car in rural Oregon or stops a drunken driver on Interstate 5 in the early morning.

As the trooper force dwindled, Hampton has become increasingly vocal about the shortages. He says he’s not comfortable with such advocacy but he’d rather be annoying than cut services or lay people off.

“Virtually my entire career has been a plea for more resources,” Hampton said. Brown appointed him superintendent in 2016.

Hampton, a Gresham native, started with the state police in 1990 when he was 19. He came on 10 years after the state severed the tie between gas tax revenue and the trooper division.

That meant the state agency had to compete with scores of others for a share of general



Aubrey Wieber/Salem Reporter

Oregon State Police Superintendent Travis Hampton flips through charts and graphs showing the impacts of short staffing. In 2017, the agency was unable to respond to 11,880 calls for service due to staffing levels.

fund budgets.

Meantime, Hampton saw Oregon’s population rise as the number of troopers lagged. When he started, the state had 512 troopers. Today, it’s budgeted for 454 positions. That’s eight troopers for every 100,000 Oregonians. Only Florida has a lower trooper per capita ratio.

The bottom line of that is troopers can’t respond to every call. In 2017, the agency recorded 11,880 calls for service that it didn’t respond to, or about 33 per day.

State police officials have pushed for decades for more funding, but never found a governor sympathetic enough

to the agency’s shortfalls.

“We really have a champion in Gov. Brown, where we have not in the past,” Hampton said.

When Brown announced her budget, Hampton had been told there would be some incremental increases to keep his operation afloat.

He was surprised to hear the funding bump and her plan to double the number of troopers over the next decade.

“I was elated, thankful,” Hampton said. “For the first day I was afraid I was going to wake up and it was a bad dream.”

Hampton started lobbying Brown 2 1/2 years ago when

she interviewed him for the job. He hasn’t stopped. Leading up to this budget cycle, he often talked with her staff as she pursued re-election.

Heidi Moawad, Brown’s public safety adviser, said Hampton was a strong advocate for his agency. He showed her that continuing to run on a slim budget was “untenable.”

The added staffing, Hampton said, means there is a better chance a trooper could respond when someone reports traffic threats, such as a swerving vehicle. More than one trooper might be able to respond to a highway crash to close off the road and provide medical attention. Some patrol stations around the state would return to 24-hour operation.

Now, there are significant gaps.

“You could conceivably enter the state in Ashland on I-5 at 3 in the morn-

ing behind a drunk driver and leave the state four hours later in Portland and not have a state trooper on duty the entire length of I-5,” Hampton said.

The state police do more than patrol highways. They manage sex offenders, authorize gun sales, provide forensic services and conduct fire investigations. When such services need money, Hampton’s usual option is to pull from resources going to troopers and criminal investigations. He typically gets money by keeping trooper positions empty — about 40.

He endures that cut to patrol services as the state’s population has skyrocketed, putting more cars on the highways.

In 2011, there were just over 300 fatal crashes on Oregon roadways. Fatalities peaked in 2016 at 450 and have only slightly lowered since.

Moawad said the state needs more troopers on the highway stopping speeders and responding promptly to accidents.

For years, the Oregon State Police has lobbied for more funding. In the current budget, the agency was given \$6 million for 20 new trooper and detective positions. But it was told to cut other spending by \$12 million.

“It’s literally me offering to buy you lunch, then I steal your wallet on the way out,” Hampton said.

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