

COUNTY OF EL DORADO

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November 5, 2024

Director Chuck Bonham
California Department of Fish and Wildlife
715 P Street
Sacramento, California 94244

Re: Statewide Mountain Lion Depredation Approach in El Dorado County

Dear Director Bonham,

We sincerely thank you for participating in the October 8, 2024 meeting of the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors where we received an update on mountain lion activity in El Dorado County and had a public discussion about potential solutions. As presented, mountain lion activity in El Dorado County has reached a critical state following the unthinkable attack on two teenage brothers in March 2024, with one brother suffering fatal injuries. This was the first confirmed human fatality from a mountain lion attack in California since 2004, causing a swell of grief, anger, and fear throughout our communities. Equally concerning is the uptick in mountain lion sightings, activity, and daytime attacks on domestic animals since this devastating fatal human attack. In El Dorado County, over 177 domestic animals have been killed by mountain lions in the first nine months of 2024, and mountain lion sightings are occurring in every community on the west slope, even in suburban neighborhoods and school yards. Current state policies are not sufficient to properly mitigate the intensified and aggressive human/cougar conflicts, and the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors was pleased by your stated commitment to work collaboratively with us to immediately affect change to ensure the safety of our residents, children, and families.

It is imperative to recognize that on July 10th, 2020, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) changed the policy on the decision process for cougar depredation permits. The policy now permits hazing after the first kill but requires two kills on the same parcel before issuing a lethal depredation permit. Furthermore, regional managers have the discretion to not issue a lethal permit. As CDFW staff now implement and authorize use of this existing policy, those actions have dramatically changed mountain lion dynamics in El Dorado County, leading to the crisis we are currently experiencing in our high conflict county.

While we are certainly not promoting a return to bounties or even the sport harvesting of cougars, research is needed in high conflict zones to assess the effectiveness of a variety of proactive hazing techniques in reducing conflict with cougars to promote a more peaceful coexistence with these animals. We are concerned a three strike or two strike policy that conditions cougars with food rewards prior to hazing may be conditioning cougars to approach human environments with less fear and thus may be increasing the frequency of depredation, as well as the potential for conflict and may lead to a decrease in support for cougar conservation. This policy should be revised for counties where conflict is high and increasing.

We cannot continue our current trajectory of cougar attacks on humans and livestock, and a return to managing conflict prior to the 2020 policy is essential. Furthermore, it is critical that depredation permits be implemented in a timely fashion, not days or weeks after the occurrence, and they should not be tied to a specific parcel, but a geographical area. We need an organized approach with defined parameters that, when met, a lethal depredation permit shall, not may, be issued. The process should be timely and consistent and not be subject to the varying interpretations of the CDFW staff contacted about a particular incident on any given day. We need a suite of options to manage this conflict, including, but not limited to, proactive hazing in appropriate areas to help dishabituate the mountain lion population.

As you addressed the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors, we were pleased that you seemed to understand the severity of the human/cougar conflict in El Dorado County, that you were horrified at our recent tragedy, and that you pledged your commitment to working closely with county leadership and community organizations to quickly implement workable solutions. The following is a summary of what we heard from you, including your commitment going forward:

- **El Dorado County leadership and citizens have legitimate concerns, and the state should begin thinking about this county as a hotspot, meaning we head towards a management strategy that is regionalized and tailored to the circumstances.**
- **You agreed with much of our Ag Commissioner's recommendations, and most of the 5 recommendations from El Dorado County's Fish and Wildlife Commission, which are attached.**
- **You recommended that hazing be implemented at a more significant pace and intensity in the future.** You remarked there has never been a moment when you cannot run dogs for hazing purposes in this county, and that there is a misperception that the 2020 memo prohibited running dogs. You stated that is not the case, and that you want to do more working with our trappers.
- **You talked about our points of agreement.** You stated you are a yes on science and collecting more local data. A yes on a more robust hazing dynamic. A yes on thinking about replicating the Washington study. A yes on shrinking times, and on permit processing.

- **You agreed to improve the CDFW's communication and collaboration in our communities, and that there should be a process to move directly to a lethal depredation permit if certain measures have been taken.** You remarked that there are parts of our communities that contribute to the problem, and that it is important to reduce the chance of a human/cougar conflict. You talked about fully enclosed, rigid enclosures, bringing animals in at night and not keeping doors open and so pets can go in and out at night hours. Trained guard dogs could help if people have domestic animals or have angled hot wire or barbed wire on 6 foot fences. If communities and individuals are doing those things, you stated they there should be a process to move directly to a lethal depredation permit if there is an encounter with a mountain lion. Above all, you pledged your commitment to working closely with us to solve this problem in El Dorado County. We agree with you that identifying El Dorado County as a hotspot for human/cougar conflicts and designing a pilot program to test potential solutions is an appropriate course of action. We implore you that time is of the essence, and we look forward to immediately designing short term and long-term solutions that will enable us to safely coexist with our natural surroundings. The security and safety of El Dorado County citizens is at stake.

With appreciation for your collaboration,

Wendy Thomas
Chair, El Dorado County Board of Supervisors

C: LeeAnne Mila, Agricultural Commissioner Weights & Measures