

West Slope Mountain Lion Plan



INFORMATION REGARDING THE PROPOSED WEST SLOPE MOUNTAIN LION MANAGEMENT PLAN

Since the release of the draft West Slope Mountain Lion Management Plan, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) has received some public feedback expressing confusion about certain aspects of the plan.

In response to those comments, CPW biologists and wildlife managers would like to provide some additional information in hopes of clearing up some of those more confusing aspects. We also hope to address concerns conveyed about mountain lion hunting philosophically and about the future wellbeing of Colorado lion populations in general.

CPW's management of mountain lions

Some people have told us that they are worried because they believe mountain lion hunting cannot be managed to ensure the long-term viability of the species in Colorado. Mountain lion hunting in Colorado is a highly regulated activity, specifically designed to ensure the long-term future for mountain lions in our state. There is no evidence whatsoever that regulated hunting in Colorado is having a negative impact on population stability of mountain lions statewide.

The harvest levels proposed in our draft West Slope plan are below those of many other states and in fact are similar to levels recommended by some lion advocacy groups. Our proposed female lion protections in particular are more conservative and biologically meaningful than those used in many other states. While lions are hunted in Colorado, that doesn't mean their populations can't also continue to be robust under current and future management. The relationship between hunting and strong big game populations is well documented and the history of scientifically-managed mule deer hunting in Colorado illustrates the point well.

Mule Deer Management Success in Colorado

According to Colorado Game and Fish Commissioner James Shinn, writing in 1911, "*The time was in Colorado when deer were so plentiful that it seemed almost impossible for them to be killed off; but with the increase in population; and the more general settling-up of our state, the deer have been killed; until now they must be carefully protected, or they will meet the fate of the buffalo and become entirely extinct.*"

About the same time, and in response to the concern about the future of mule deer, wildlife management and conservation efforts began. In 1903, the first licenses were issued to regulate hunting and commercial outfitting. By 1950, there were more deer in Colorado than at any previous time in the 20th century. Fifty years earlier, there had been too few to hunt. In 1963, a record number of deer were taken by licensed hunters. The mule deer story demonstrates that regulated

hunting is not incompatible with wildlife conservation. Furthermore, hunting has provided most of the funding for wildlife conservation since the early 1900s.

CPW's proposed West Slope Mountain Lion Plan is consistent with state statute which declares "*It is the policy of the state of Colorado that the wildlife and their environment are to be protected, preserved, enhanced, and managed for the use, benefit, and enjoyment of the people of this state and its visitors. It is further declared to be the policy of this state that there shall be provided a comprehensive program designed to offer the greatest possible variety of wildlife-related recreational opportunity to the people of this state and its visitors ...*"

We believe carefully regulated mountain lion hunting is one form of "wildlife-related recreational opportunity" as mentioned in statute. State statute goes on to declare that the "*state shall utilize hunting, trapping, and fishing as the primary methods of effecting necessary wildlife harvests.*" We cannot foresee a time when the lethal removal of mountain lions will be unnecessary. Ensuring the safety of Coloradans will from time to time require that dangerous lions be removed, whether by agency staff/contractors, by licensed and trained hunters, or both.

What is the West Slope Mountain Lion Management Plan?

The proposed West Slope Mountain Lion Management Plan revises and consolidates 13 older lion management plans that cover the western part of the Colorado into one overarching plan that manages lions at a larger scale. This scale is more biologically appropriate for a far-ranging species that regularly moves across the state and beyond. This plan relies upon the best available science to manage to the proposed objective of maintaining current lion population sizes. The plan uses two independent measures or thresholds as safeguards to prevent overharvest and to manage for relatively stable populations over time. If either one of the thresholds is exceeded, hunter harvest will be reduced. The first threshold safeguards the biological engine of lion populations (adult females) and was developed from recommendations in several independent studies. The second sets the upper boundary of all human-caused lion mortality. Human-caused mortality includes not just hunting harvest, but also landowner and human-lion conflict kills, as well as roadkills. Numerous studies, including a CPW manuscript currently undergoing peer review summarizing the 10-year Uncompahgre Plateau lion project described below, support a sustainable population-scale total human-caused mortality rate of below 17%, with hunting harvest being more in the 11-15% range, as is laid out in the West Slope plan. The draft West Slope plan explicitly incorporates results on upper mortality bounds to prevent population declines found by *our researchers in their final analysis* as well as in other states.

The new draft plan only provides revisions to lion management plans on the West Slope. As such, the annual maximum number of mountain lions allowed to be harvested for the *West Slope only*, would be reduced from around 532 lions, which it averaged in recent years, to around 461. The draft plan therefore recommends a *reduction of more than 70 lions* in the maximum annual harvest that is allowable across the entire West Slope (including the Glenwood Springs area).

The draft plan provides a science-based framework for maintaining a stable lion population across the entire West Slope for the foreseeable future. The plan lays out rigorous safeguards on harvest levels, includes

annual evaluations of independent metrics to make sure mortality levels are acceptable, incorporates a commitment to measuring lion population sizes in select survey areas, and provides flexibility with a series of management tools around Glenwood Springs to address public safety concerns due to human-lion conflicts. The proposed Glenwood Springs Special Management Area, where lion populations would be reduced, is around 1,800 mi², whereas under our 13 older unit-specific plans, lion populations were suppressed in two large units (Grand Mesa area and the White River/Meeker area) that spanned over 11,000 mi². That is a reduction of nearly 84% in the size of the area managed for suppression compared to current plans. The local area around Glenwood Springs is the only area proposed for a smaller population under the draft West Slope plan. The strategies of increased harvest opportunities, heightened educational outreach and focus on addressing individual lions in human-conflicts will be evaluated under an adaptive management approach to assess success of conflict reduction.

Careful readers of the draft lion plan will note that the plan does not propose reductions of regional lion populations to bolster deer or elk numbers, as has been alleged. In fact, the plan moves away from the suppression objective outlined in two of the older lion plans and sets new limits intended to maintain lion populations at levels similar to what they are now.

Major Studies Colorado Parks and Wildlife has undertaken on Mountain Lions

Colorado Parks and Wildlife has demonstrated its commitment to this species by undertaking a number of long-term research projects on mountain lions. Because it is costly and difficult to conduct at the necessary scales of time and geography, very few mountain lion studies in the U.S. have spanned the length of CPW's studies. Dr. Ken Logan's Uncompahgre Mountain Lion Study began in 2004 and concluded in 2014. This study evaluated effects of harvest on a lion population and helped inform the human-caused mortality threshold proposed to maintain a stable population in the West Slope plan.

CPW scientist Dr. Mat Alldredge embarked on another major 10-year research project, the Front Range Mountain Lion Study, which started in 2005. The research took place along the interface of the foothills and towns of the northern Front Range corridor (Boulder and Jefferson Counties). CPW's objective was to understand how mountain lions used the urban interface to address growing concerns and challenges with habitat destruction, urban sprawl, and human-lion conflict. Dr. Alldredge is currently conducting a 9-year study on the relationship between lion populations and mule deer and the impact of hunting on lion populations in the area of the upper Arkansas River. The study is in its fourth year.

CPW's goals for conservation

CPW understands that not everyone is a hunter. Whether they hunt or not, many Coloradans just like knowing that lions are out there on the landscape. Our mission as an agency includes ensuring that future. As we noted above with mule deer, it is possible to have robust and stable populations of wild animal populations while also allowing hunting.

Some people have referenced the "California system" that eliminated lion hunting in 1990, and implied this is why wildlife managers in that state have not seen increased human-wildlife conflicts. In reality, California has regulations that allow for the take of depredating mountain lions along with the removal of individual

lions that are deemed dangerous to people. Rather than managing mountain lions through regulated hunting, wildlife managers in California issue depredation permits to help manage lions. Removing hunting as a wildlife management tool did not lead to the elimination of mountain lion deaths. Today, 3-4 times as many lions are removed in California on landowner depredation permits due to conflict than are taken by landowners or federal damage agents in Colorado. In California's case, it shifted the effort from sportspersons who buy licenses to help fund the agency's conservation efforts to employees whose time and efforts actually costs the agency, redirecting funding from other important species conservation programs. Additionally, hunters in Colorado must make use of meat from harvested lions, which is a further beneficial use of the resource. The proposed Colorado plan strives for a balance between hunting, watchable wildlife opportunities, and human safety.

There are no real-world examples of success with just letting lions "exist" without management. The Florida panther population has grown as a result of active management - bringing 8 female lions in from Texas to supplement genetics in what was appearing to become a fatal genetic bottleneck in Florida. Newer lion populations in South Dakota, North Dakota, and Nebraska have become established due to wildlife agency management, not despite it.

The proposed West Slope plan incorporates advances in the science of lion management from the last 15 years, including the two long-term research projects in Colorado. The plan manages for maintaining stable lion populations, similar in numbers to what we have today, across the West Slope, by implementing clear annual thresholds. It incorporates adaptive management in evaluating human-lion conflicts and gathers crucial lion population size data on the West Slope. This is all achieved while balancing multiple compatible opportunities for the public to use, benefit and enjoy lion populations into the future.

Wildlife management in Colorado

Our agency's mission is critical and relevant to all Coloradans; we work to conserve 960 species, 42 state parks and over 350 state wildlife areas. Colorado Parks and Wildlife is charged to protect and promote the wildlife, lands and waters that build the foundation of the Colorado lifestyle. As part of our work, staff biologists conduct multiple research studies to help inform how we manage wildlife and the habitats they depend on to make sure Colorado's natural beauty and wild allure remain intact as we see continued population growth, urbanization, and increased recreation.