

## **Groups push for NM hunter education about mountain lions**

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. -- Conservationists are pushing for hunters to be educated about mountain lions before hunting the big cats in New Mexico, and they hope other Western states will take notice. The New Mexico Game Commission is considering changes to its big game hunting rules, and WildEarth Guardians and Animal Protection of New Mexico want commissioners to require hunters to take a mountain lion education and identification course before heading into the woods. The idea is to teach hunters the difference between male and female cats to ensure that more breeding females are left in the wild and kittens are not orphaned.

New Mexico would be only the second state to have such a program. Colorado started its online cougar education and testing program last year. Wendy Keefover-Ring, director of carnivore protection for WildEarth Guardians, worked with the Colorado Division of Wildlife, sportsmen's groups and other conservationists for about six years to get the program started in Colorado.

"That's my goal, is to get it in New Mexico and some other surrounding states. It's hugely important," she said. "It's so key to conserving the species, protecting the breeding females and their dependent kittens."

While the exact number of mountain lions in New Mexico is not known, estimates hover around 2,500. The Game and Fish Department said during a commission meeting Thursday that the state's cougar levels are healthy, as is the female harvest level. But WildEarth Guardians and Animal Protection of New Mexico think too many females are being killed. They note that since 1999 more than two-fifths of all cougars killed in the state have been females, with a record high of 51 percent in 2007. In comments submitted to the Game Commission, the groups say mother cats protect, feed and teach their kittens survival skills. They point to research that suggests kittens are dependent on their mothers for at least six months and the death of one mother could result in the unintended death of between one and three kittens. The department has said it's considering delaying the hunting season by a month to address the orphan issue.

Also, Game and Fish requires hunters to bring in their kills so teeth samples can be taken to get a better understanding of how many females are being hunted and how old they are. The teeth have yet to be analyzed, but the department said it could consider putting a limit on the number of female cougars hunted. That would be in addition to the overall quotas already in place for mountain lion hunting.

Any changes to the cougar hunt and the rest of the state's big game hunts will be up to the Game Commission. Its next meeting is Oct. 2. In Colorado, officials said the education and identification program is still too new to have any concrete numbers on how it might be affecting the cougar hunt. Mark Cousins, hunter education coordinator for the Colorado Division of Wildlife, said hunters and outfitters were among those calling for something to be done to ensure the stability of the female cat population.

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Keefover-Ring said of all the recommendations submitted to the Game Commission, she's most hopeful a mandatory education course would be adopted. She also wants the department to consider ending a cougar control program in the southeastern part of New Mexico that is aimed at keeping livestock depredation at a minimum.

Mountain lion management has become an issue across the West, said Lynn Sadler, president and CEO of the California-based Mountain Lion Foundation. She said wildlife managers have to carefully consider how their policies affect not just cougars, but entire ecosystems. Sadler said studies have shown that removing cougars from the ecosystem can have a ripple effect all the way through the food chain. "When you mess with nature, you don't know what's coming next sometimes. So to risk your ecosystem by taking out the top carnivore to me is just insane," she said.