

GF&P commission increases lion hunting quota from 35 to 40

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PIERRE -- South Dakota hunters will get a chance to kill more mountain lions next year under changes in the hunting season approved Wednesday by the Game, Fish and Parks Commission. Supporters of the move said the changes will control the number of mountain lions in the Black Hills while giving more hunters a chance to kill the big cats. Opponents said increased quotas could harm the mountain lion population.

The new hunting season will run Jan. 1 through March 31, but will end earlier if either 40 total lions or 25 females are shot sooner. Hunters who shoot mountain lions must show the animals to state wildlife officials within 24 hours. The mountain lion season was first held in 2005, and each session has ended early because female quotas were reached.

Staff at the state Department of Game, Fish and Parks recommended in May that a limit of 35 total lions or 20 females, which they said would maintain the Black Hills lion population at its current estimated level of 250. But the commission proposed higher quotas a month ago after some members said they believed the population should be cut to limit conflicts with humans and to reduce the number of elk and deer killed by mountain lions. An analysis by department staff found the higher quotas might cut the number of mountain lions but the population likely wouldn't be irreparably harmed.

Hunters cannot shoot any lion with a spotted coat, a rule aimed at protecting kittens. They also cannot shoot any lion accompanying another, a restriction intended to reduce the killing of females and orphaning of kittens. Dogs cannot be used in hunting the cats. Landowners outside the Black Hills who buy licenses can shoot cougars year-round on land they own or lease.

Opponents of the increased limits said South Dakota should have no hunting season for mountain lions, but if one is held to stick with last year's quotas. Sharon Seneczko, a Custer veterinarian and founder of the Black Hills Mountain Lion Foundation, said the increased quota for females means that more kittens are likely to be orphaned before they are fully equipped to survive on their own.

The mountain lion population has stabilized but has not exploded, Seneczko said. Quotas should be left unchanged for several years so state biologists can study how hunting affects cougar numbers, she said. Tom Huhnerkoch, a Deadwood veterinarian and mountain lion advocate, said supporters of hunting spread lies and fear by making claims that mountain lions kill too many deer and elk. He said especially incorrect was some hunters' claims that the cats will likely kill a child. Mountain lions often live around people without causing problems or even being noticed, Huhnerkoch said. "Towns and cougars can get along," he said.

Tim R. Goodwin of Rapid City, a hunter, asked the commission to approve the increased quotas to give more hunters a chance at mountain lions. "I don't feel bad about hunting mountain lions," Goodwin said, explaining that the cats have a big advantage over hunters in the forest. "It's the granddaddy of all the hunting seasons we have in South Dakota."