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Should Colorado's mountain lions be hunted? Voters could decide in new ballot initiative

Effort comes after successful ballot initiative led to reintroduction of wolves



A mountain lion is seen in Colorado in this undated file photo. (Photo courtesy of Jason Clay/Colorado Parks and Wildlife)





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Three years after a successful ballot initiative push to reintroduce wolves, wildlife advocates will try again to put decisions about managing Colorado's carnivores in the hands of voters.

A coalition of wildlife advocates will pursue a ballot initiative to ban the hunting of mountain lions and the trapping of bobcats in Colorado. If the coalition can collect 124,238 signatures, they will place the question on the 2024 ballot.

Those pursuing the ballot initiative say there is no scientific reason to hunt mountain lions or bobcats and that methods used to do so are inhumane.

"This isn't managing anything, this isn't solving anything," said Julie Marshall, national communications coordinator for Animal Wellness Action and the Center for Humane Economy. "This is about trophies and about fun. If you want to call it recreation, fine, but it's clear it's about trophies."

The effort comes three years after a successful and controversial ballot initiative allowed Colorado voters to decide whether to reintroduce wolves in the state. Fifty-one percent of voters approved the reintroduction and state wildlife officials are tasked with releasing wolves back into Colorado by the end of the year.

The back-to-back ballot initiatives are prompting some to question who should make wildlife management decisions in the state — wildlife officials or voters?

"We consider Colorado Parks and Wildlife the folks who need to be making those decisions when it comes to wildlife management in the state of Colorado," said

Those who hunt mountain lions said regulated hunting of the species is necessary for wildlife management. Ethical hunters use hounds responsibly and use the meat of the harvested lion, they said.

Those leading the ballot initiative said they decided to take the decision to voters after trying other methods to change policy and failing. Colorado Parks and Wildlife commissioners in 2019 denied a request to ban bobcat trapping despite a petition with more than 200,000 signatures. In 2022, a bill to ban bobcat trapping and mountain lion hunting died in its first committee hearing, Marshall said.

"It feels like there is no recourse for what we feel like Coloradans wouldn't want for their wildlife," she said.

The initiative

It's difficult to determine how many mountain lions live in Colorado because of their elusive nature and wide-ranging habits, but wildlife officials estimate their number at between 3,000 and 7,000.

Every year in Colorado, hunters kill hundreds of mountain lions and bobcats. Hunters killed an average of 500 mountain lions and 1,300 bobcats over the last three years, according to Colorado Parks and Wildlife.

Permits to hunt mountain lions cost \$50 for residents and \$388 for non-residents. Bobcats can be trapped and hunted with a \$33 furbearer license or a \$10 permit in addition to a small game license. While a mountain lion tag allows for the killing of one animal, there is no limit to how many bobcats a hunter can kill.

Hunting a mountain lion generally involves finding recent tracks and releasing a pack of hounds to track the lion. Once the hounds force the lion into a tree, the hunter finds the dogs and shoots the treed lion.

It's unethical to use dogs to chase a lion and shoot it while it hides in a tree, advocates supporting the ballot initiative said. They said dogs and the technology violate the principle of fair chase — a hunting ethic that mandates hunters not use methods or technologies that give them an unfair advantage over the animals they are seeking.

"Hunting elk or deer, you're out walking around, there are no dogs and animals chasing your game around to get it cornered and up a tree," said Brett Ochs, a supporter of the initiative and Niwot resident who has hunted deer, elk and pronghorn for 35 years. "That's not fair chase."

Other hunters disagree.

Using dogs in a mountain lion hunt is not so different from using dogs to hunt birds, Jones said.

Using hounds requires a high level of skill and traversing the mountainous terrain the mountain lions occupy during the winter hunting season is difficult, said Earl Oesterling, owner of Ivory and Antler Outfitters, which offers guided mountain lion hunts in northern Colorado. The outfitter recommends would-be mountain lion hunters be in tip-top shape to handle the extreme terrain and altitude.

"A lot of the time the lions outmaneuver the dogs or the dogs lose the track," he said.

More broadly, supporters of the initiative said mountain lions and bobcats shouldn't be hunted because they said there is no need for it to regulate the population or the populations of the animals they prey on.

"There's no proof of need, so what are we doing this for?" Marshall said.

The initiative, if approved, would not stop ranchers or wildlife officials from killing cats that become threats to people, domestic animals or livestock.

Trophy hunting?

Proponents of the initiative have alleged that cougar hunting is "trophy hunting" pursued solely for a photo and a pelt or taxidermy. They compared it to hunting for lions in Africa.

But Oesterling and Jones said it's difficult to define "trophy hunting." Many hunters want to take photos with the animals they harvest and enjoy their time spent outside during the hunt, but that's not inherently wrong, they said. It's not any different than hunting elk or deer, Oesterling said.

Oesterling has prepared and eaten mountain lion — he once made it into a queso dip — and said it was delicious. He preferred it over elk or deer.

It's unfair for someone who doesn't hunt to assume what a hunter's motivation might be, Oesterling said. A lifelong hunter, the experience of spending weeks in the woods and learning about animals and habitats is a core part of his life. He respects the animals he hunts.

"For me, it's spiritual," he said.

Who should make the rules?

Leaving wildlife management and hunting decisions to voters — many of whom have no biology background or hunting experience — is contrary to how wildlife has been managed in the U.S. for more than a century, both Jones and Oesterling said.

"That's the problem with the ballot initiatives as a whole — you take out biology and you put it in the hands of people who are acting with emotion," Oesterling said.

But proponents of the initiative said sometimes the fate of the state's wildlife should be left to the citizens of the state. Several of the people working on the mountain lion initiative also advocated to reintroduce wolves.

"I'm a believer in the citizens," Ochs said. "That's how democracy works — the majority win."

Besides the wolf reintroduction, there are other precedents for voters changing wildlife management laws, they said.

In 1992, Coloradans voted 70% to 30% to ban the use of bait and the use of hounds while hunting black bears and eliminate the spring bear hunting season.

In 1996, Colorado voters by a margin of 4% approved a constitutional amendment that banned poisoning or snaring wildlife as well as certain types of traps.

The 2019 petition to ban bobcat trapping was denied by the Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commission after state biologists wrote there was not adequate science

“When ethics in certain kinds of hunting cross the line and we have no other recourse, I think this is the right choice,” Marshall said of the ballot initiative.

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