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New Mexico's iconic cougars and bears: More valuable than a stuffed trophy

ALBUQUERQUE, NM—New Mexico's wildlife management agency is throwing caution to the wind by ignoring sound science and the state's worsening climate threats, as they call for unsustainable and unjustifiable levels of bear and cougar trophy hunting. Game officials have doubled down on permitting trophy hunters to kill New Mexico's rare and iconic black bears and cougars—864 black bears and 563 cougars annually—all with the aid of radio-collared hunting hounds—for each of the next four years.

“Our state's black bears and cougars are worth far more than a stuffed trophy, and their cubs and kittens should not be chased with packs of radio-collared hounds across our wild landscapes” said Nina Eydelman, Chief Program & Policy Officer-Wildlife for Animal Protection New Mexico. She added, “New Mexicans greatly value and appreciate these rare wild animals, so as they struggle to survive amid extreme heat,

fires, and drought, the public expects the state's wildlife management agency to call for *more* conservation efforts on their behalf, not less. Tragically, that is not happening."

"Obtaining an accurate population count of either black bears or cougars is very difficult," said Mary Katherine Ray, Wildlife Chair, Rio Grande Chapter of the Sierra Club. "In New Mexico, there have been only a handful of now mostly outdated studies conducted for short durations and in select prime habitats risking an incorrect conclusion that populations are higher than they really are. There have been no repeat studies to examine population trends so there is no evidence that even current hunting levels are sustainable," she stated.

As part of its bizarre public rulemaking process, the public must visit the agency's website *daily* to see what new changes the agency is proposing as part of its black bear and cougar rule—during the agency's public comment process—while the agency provides the public with no notice of their sudden changes. In other words, the NMDGF is changing the foundation that informs the public comment process *in the middle* of the comment process.

"The New Mexico wildlife management agency expects the public to adjust to its scattered, unorganized rulemaking process. The fate of keystone species like bears and cougars matters greatly to the majority of New Mexicans, and it is impossible to provide meaningful public input without knowing what specific changes are at stake and why," said Eydelman.

Background:

New Mexico Dept. of Game and Fish is finalizing the new rules for governing the trophy hunting of bears and cougars for the next four years. While the Game Commission is expected to vote on the bear and cougar rule on October 20th, the Department's proposal will be finalized in September so the public **must provide written comments by August 23rd to influence changes to the rule.** Comments can be submitted to DGF-Bear-Cougar-Rules@state.nm.us.

The public is highly encouraged to attend the Game Commission meetings in person on August 25th in Raton and on October 20th in Farmington to voice their opinion about the bear and cougar rule. Remote attendance by Zoom is also available with registration in advance.

The current quotas for both bears and cougars are unsustainable and will threaten local bear and lion populations, who are uniquely adapted to their arid environment.

Because these carnivores' populations are hard to census, researchers of New Mexico's cougar and bears have collected data sets only for short durations and in the very best habitats. Then the department extrapolates those higher population numbers statewide — resulting in inflated population estimates used to justify too-high, trophy-hunting quotas on bears and cougars.

The Department of Game and Fish must cut, not increase, hunting quotas and seasons to protect New Mexico's bear and cougar populations to prevent the loss of some populations. Bears and cougars live on biological islands—their subpopulations are not well connected, and this results in inbreeding, if their population numbers are low.

New Mexico is currently experiencing a 20-year “megadrought,” the driest period in the Southwest since A.D. 800, and a record heat wave this summer. Additionally, New Mexico's two record-breaking fires in 2022 consumed over 666,800 acres of primary wildlife habitat. High-severity fires burn up seed banks and leave barren moonscapes. Bears depend on berries, acorns, and other vegetation for survival. And if there are no plants for cougars' prey, cougar numbers plummet too.

The consequences of trophy hunting on bears and cougars are dire because neither bears nor cougars evolved as prey animals. Therefore, hunting them in large numbers is unsustainable. They reproduce slowly, having litters only every other year — making bears and cougars especially vulnerable to overhunting. New Mexico's bears first give birth when they're about 5 years old, and, on average, trophy hunters kill females when they are 6. Females may reproduce only once before they're dead.

Both bears and cougars hold intrinsic value. For example, they are highly intelligent and devoted mothers, who spend up to two years raising their young. Bears and cougars also hold ecological value. Bears spread more seeds than birds, and cougars leave more leftovers for other animals than other large carnivores, enhancing biological diversity.

APNM and the Rio Grande Chapter of the Sierra Club are urging the public to tell officials at the Department of Game and Fish they oppose their bear and cougar quotas and long trophy hunting seasons and to ask that kill quotas be significantly reduced to protect our valuable wildlife. Email public comments to DGF-Bear-Cougar-Rules@state.nm.us and attend the open Game Commission meetings on August 25th and October 20th to make your voice heard.

APNM has provided talking points on the issue for download at the following link.
<https://apnm.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Bears-and-Cougars-Need-Your-Help-Right-Now.pdf>

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About Animal Protection New Mexico

Animal Protection New Mexico's mission is to advocate the rights of animals by effecting systemic change, resulting in the humane treatment of all animals. In 2019, APNM celebrated its 40th anniversary of planning, implementing, and succeeding with dynamic programs, projects, and collaborations that span a broad spectrum of animal protection issues.

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About Sierra Club

The Mission of the Sierra Club is to explore, enjoy, and protect the wild places of the earth; to practice and promote the responsible use of the earth's ecosystems and resources; to educate and enlist humanity to protect and restore the quality of the natural and human environment; and to use all lawful means to carry out these objectives.