

Senate Bill 260
February 19, 2013
Presented by Ken McDonald
Senate Fish and Game Committee

Mr. Chairman and committee members, I am Ken McDonald, Wildlife Division Administrator of the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP). I am here in opposition to Senate Bill 260 because of its impact to resident hunter opportunity.

SB 260 would expand nonresident participation in controlled hunts for large predators to 35% from the current 10% limit set for all game species by statute. At present, mountain lions are the only large predator in Montana currently managed with controlled hunt licenses, and then only in Region 1 (northwest MT) where the controlled permits run season long and in Region 2 (western MT) where the controlled permit season changes to a general season after February 1 if the quota is not met. General mountain lion seasons in these regions were replaced with limited permit lion hunts over the past 10 years, due to excessive hunting pressure and a "race to kill" environment that impacted hunt quality, confounded quota management and was fueled in part by nonresident hunters and their guides.

To give an example of what this bill would do, during 2012, there were 2,215 Montana residents who applied for the 361 special mountain lion licenses in Regions 1 and 2. Under the 10% limitation, special mountain lion licenses were issued to 332 residents and 29 nonresidents. HB 260 would change that allocation to 296 residents and 65 nonresidents. Therefore, using 2012 application rates for the example, HB 260 would shift 36 special lion licenses from Montana resident to nonresident hunters. Because the resident demand for mountain lion hunting opportunity greatly exceeds the supply, FWP expects considerable opposition to this change from Montana residents, most notably from the Montana hound hunting community. And especially, because additional nonresident hunters are not needed to meet management objectives for mountain lions.

It is also important to recognize that nonresident hunters have unlimited opportunity to participate in general mountain lion seasons in FWP Regions 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. They can also hunt in Region 2 after February 1 if there are unfilled quotas. Therefore, nonresidents already have unlimited access to most of the mountain lion hunting opportunity in Montana.

Finally, we are hoping to delist grizzly bears within the next couple of years, and implement limited hunting seasons for them after delisting. This bill would result in a relatively high proportion of those highly coveted licenses going to nonresident hunters at the expense of resident hunters who shouldered much of the burden for grizzly bear recovery.

The issues surrounding limited license allocation are complex and often contentious. The current statutory framework has been in place since 1979 and is the product of much legislative history and Montana resident expectations. Additionally, the current season structure for mountain lions is the product of continuous negotiation and cooperation, and numerous Commission adoptions in the context of considerable public involvement. The system we have in place is working. For this reason, FWP respectfully requests a Do Not Pass on SB 260.