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January 28<sup>th</sup> 2014

Dear Senator Carlson,

*The Cougar Fund* is a national organization dedicated to the protection of cougars and other large carnivores by utilizing education and recommending sound science as a basis for management protocols.

**Thank you for the privilege of participating in the Hearing of LB 671 by accepting our written comments as submitted for the record.** Wildlife does not know the boundaries of state lines. What each state chooses to do will ultimately impact it's neighbors and beyond.

As we consider the mountain lion and it's place in your Great State of Nebraska, we must look at many facets of this iconic creature's existence, including biological and ecological factors, societal concerns and ethical/philosophical issues.

Let us start with biology. The presence of cougars in the Pine Ridge region is comprised of a tiny, newly established breeding population. The estimate of the Nebraska Game and Park Commission is of fifteen to twenty two animals. By comparison, the size of your inaugural quota far exceeds accepted ratios for sustainability and puts that population very much at risk. It has been stated that elimination is not the goal, but the quota and its consequences would suggest otherwise.

As territory within the Pine Ridge is made vacant by hunting, there is solid scientific evidence that immigration will occur from outside Nebraska. Immigrating lions are usually those who have recently separated from their mothers and are dispersing to find their own territory. They are more likely to be males, since females are more tolerant of overlapping territories. They are more likely to be juveniles with less experience, and they are more likely to arrive in multiples prior to establishing a victor for the available territory. An additional destabilizing factor is their instinct to perpetrate their own genes, which leads them to infanticide as they try to force females into estrus by removing any dependent young. The population dynamics of such a small number of lions will be easily destabilized.

Of further concern is the question of genetic 'inbreeding' that has recently been discovered in an isolated lion population in California. Whether the isolation occurs because of habitat fragmentation or hunting, the results are the same. The genetic diversity is compromised.

Yet another biological concern that should be addressed is that hunting is random, indiscriminate, and often results in the unintended loss of females who are the foundation of a viable population. Mountain lions are the only large mammal that is hunted when there may be dependent young and since they are

either pregnant or with kittens for 70 per cent of their adult lives, there is always the probability of collateral mortality. Female cougars lactate for only about seven weeks, yet their young may rely on them for anywhere from 18 to 24 months. Thus, identification of lactation is not a reliable indicator of whether there are dependent kittens. Ironically, even though kittens have actually been known to survive as young as six months old, they are more likely to come into conflict.

There is more and more evidence being collected and analyzed to indicate the ecological benefit of cougars and other large carnivores. The simplicity of the food web shows that removal of one of the components, especially if that component is an apex predator, leads to over abundance of prey species. This fact alone should be of greater concern to Nebraska's livestock growers since drought, and less than optimal grazing opportunities mean that they are constantly competing with ungulates as they seek to feed their domestic herds and protect their livelihoods. The cougar's habitat of choice is cover and riparian areas, which makes it a positive contributor to the health of rivers that are at risk for erosion by overgrazing. Vegetation is lost and there is a consequent impact on song birds and fish as bank-loving trees recede and water temperatures rise from lack of shade. It is evident that the chosen routes of the cougars (that have been recorded moving eastward) would benefit the riparian areas through which they travel. It would also offer a rare opportunity to disperse to their previous prairie state territory and beyond, where they can again enhance the biodiversity that has deteriorated due to lack of predators.

Probably the most compelling and emotive concerns are those of society. These concerns are usually founded in unrealistic fear, misinformation and the lack of knowledge about the role of predators within the environment. Nebraska has already addressed the most potent of these concerns with its strategic and responsive conflict management protocol. Wildlife biologist Sam Wilson is more than clear in his video on the Game and Park website-that the commission always errs on the side of safety and already removes every cat that might present even the smallest risk. While the enthusiasm that drives this policy may actually err on the side of removing animals that are not an actual risk, it still constitutes targeted culling and since there has NEVER been a confirmed attack or livestock depredation in Nebraska, it would appear to be a successful public safety effort. There are, however, alternate ways to achieve public safety, among those are prevention and education. People, pets, livestock AND wildlife all enjoy the advantages of preventing conflict, rather than the killing that occurs after the damage is done. It is more than unfortunate that the cougar hunt insinuates that containment and random reduction are safety factors. Education does not happen through the publicity that surrounds killing an animal, nor should education be subsidized from the proceeds of killing that animal.

Livestock protection comes down to a matter of good husbandry and incorporation of conflict prevention and non-lethal deterrence; it does not come through the barrel of a gun.

As we conclude our comments we will address those ethical and philosophical matters that should probably concern us most. We must look at what we are willing to accept in the realm of human behavior in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yes, we can look to the biological detriment that comes from killing a whole family by proxy when a mother cougar is taken. Recruitment is impacted and the hierarchy is destabilized, but what of our human values? Deliberately condemning wild babies to starvation or depredation has an impact on how we view ourselves. We must especially question our own natures when we allow this to be done in the name of recreation alone. Are we really a nation that condones chasing a wild animal with baying hounds to the point of exhaustion, then treeing it and casually looking into it's eyes as we shoot it right

out of it's arbor prison? Killing a cougar as it takes refuge in a place from which it cannot escape, and by means of an activity that in no way resembles 'fair chase' is not a situation that ANY state legislature should be fighting to retain.

And what of consumptive needs? Mountain lion is not generally eaten; it is killed for a trophy, for a false and incomprehensible sign of man's dominion over nature. A cougar that had a viable and necessary place in the ecosystem is relegated to become a 'good story', or a wall hanging, or a rug. We can no longer accept such primitive standards of recreation, enjoyed by so few, and damaging to so many.

Lastly, we would like to reiterate our thanks to the members of the committee for reading this letter. We trust that Nebraska is a state that values its natural resources, its wild and precious flora and fauna. We trust that you want the state to be seen as managing that resource based on sound science and not the illegitimate premise that you are shooting these cougars to save them!

Sport hunting of cougars seems like a cruel and inhumane practice and indeed it is. **Please support LB 671 and repeal cougar hunting**

Respectfully Submitted,

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