

Cougar Hunting Seasons and Regulations WAC 220-415-100

Anis Aoude
Game Division Manager, Wildlife Program



CONTENT

- Background
- Proposed rule changes
- Public comment
- Summary



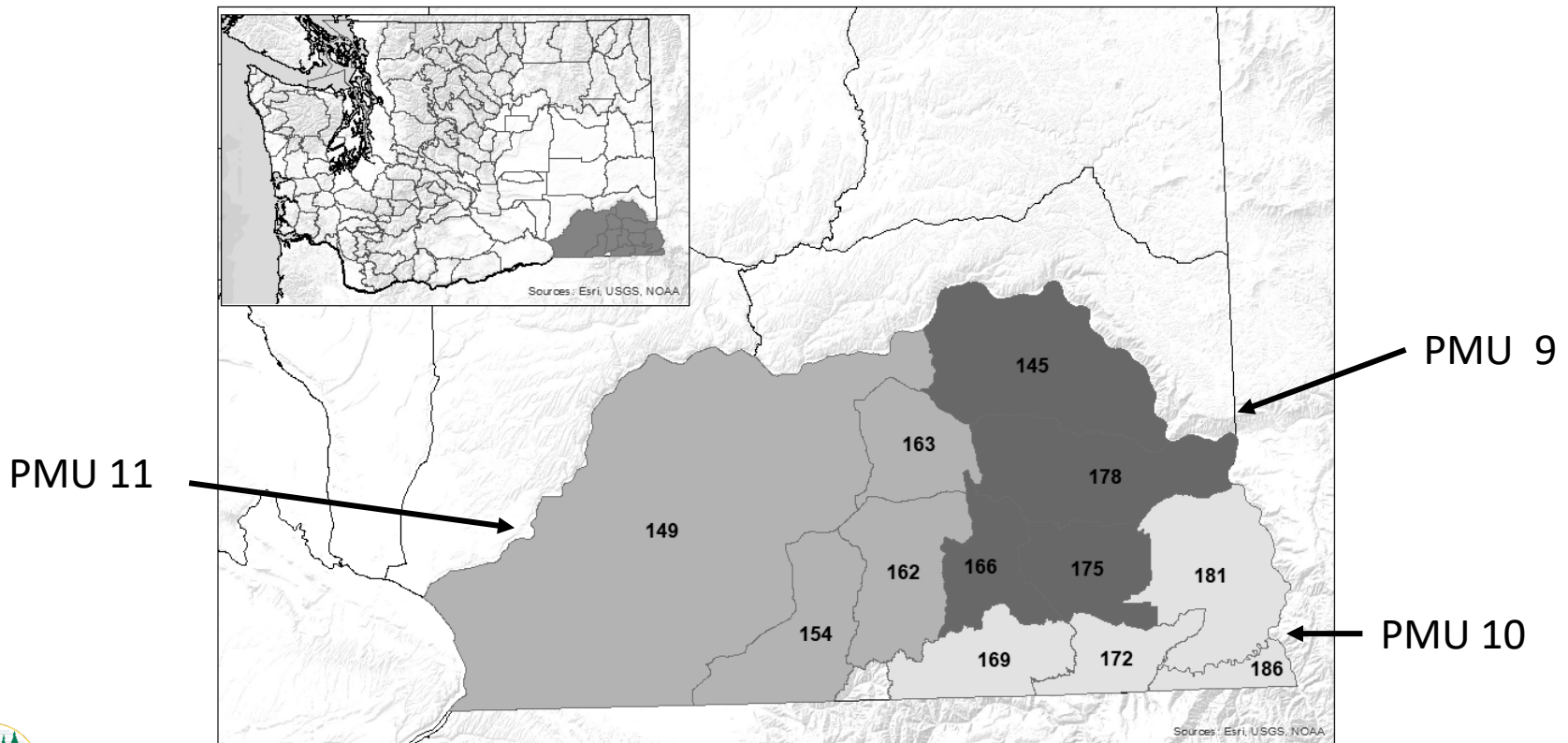
Background

- ❑ The changes we are proposing only relate to cougars hunting in the Blue Mountains Game Management Units (GMU)
- ❑ The proposal is intended to reduce cougar density to increase elk calf survival



Background

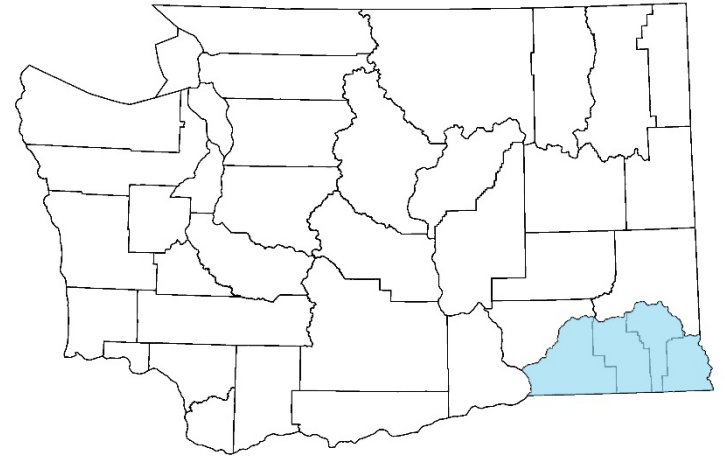
- Three Population Management Units (PMUs) within the Blue Mountains area; comprised of 13 GMUs.



Problem Statement

Blue Mountains elk

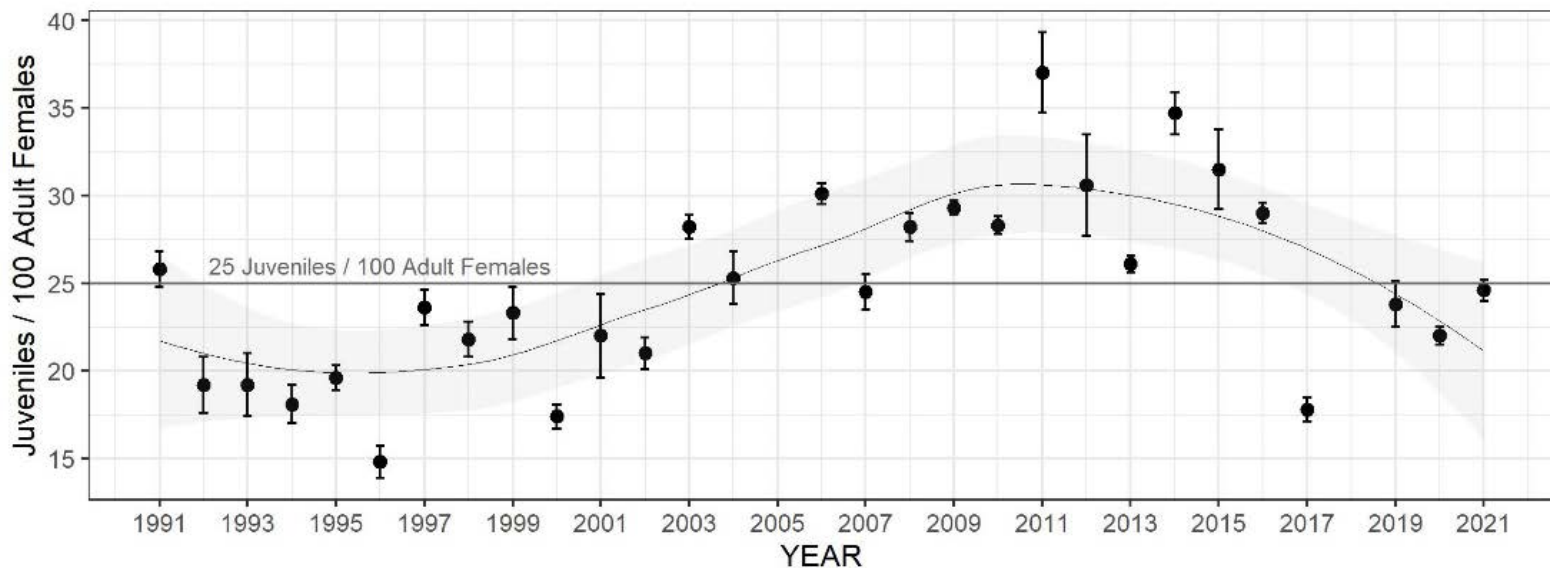
- Population declined ~20% from 2015-2017
- Despite antlerless harvest reductions, population continues to decline



Problem Statement

Blue Mountains elk

- Surveys indicate calf recruitment is insufficient to reverse the decline
- WDFW continue to document depressed calf:cow ratios



At-risk assessment

Blue Mountains elk

- An assessment was initiated in late 2020
- Objectives of the At-risk assessment were to:
 - Review available information (literature, data) to identify factors that may be limiting growth
 - Formulate management options to stop the decline



At-risk assessment

Blue Mountains elk

- The Department's assessment reviews factors known to influence elk and elk populations:
 - Elk survival
 - Predation
 - Habitat
 - Human use
 - Climate



Actions and Timeline

- Autumn 2020 –Initiated at-risk assessment
- May 2021 -Initiated calf survival monitoring effort (*ongoing*)
- June 2021-Initiated efforts to estimate black bear density in GMUs 162 and 166 (*analysis pending*)
- March 2022 -Finalize the at-risk assessment
- Includes monitoring analyses and management recommendations
- Briefing to FWC
- Spring/Summer 2022 –Review of assessment and recommendations
- Autumn 2022 -any actionable management measures, if approved, may be implemented



At-risk assessment

Carnivores

Wolf, bear, and cougar impacts on elk assessed through:

- Relevant literature review and summary
- Population status and harvest management review

- Reported impacts are variable
- Predation can limit growth, but other influential factors confound simple conclusions
- When the initial assessment was conducted there was limited contemporary information on the impacts of predation



At-risk assessment

Other influential factors

Habitat, disturbance, development, land use, and climate assessed through:

- Literature review
- Summary of relevant research and management activity

- Long history of habitat improvement in Blue Mtns
- Impact of disturbance unclear
- Nutrition is highly influential on elk population performance
- Climate, land use, disturbance all influence elk through direct and indirect effects



At-risk assessment

Summary

- Decline appears to be driven by trends in 3 core GMUs
 - Disentangling interactive top-down, bottom-up and climatic effects is challenging
- Nutrition is a potential limiting factor
 - Understanding nutritional limitation requires multi-year intensive investigation
 - Limited management control
 - Long duration for response
 - Predation is a potential limiting factor
 - Ongoing monitoring of juvenile elk survival
 - Broader management control
 - Short term action for nearer term response



At-risk assessment

Calf mortality

- 3 core GMUs continue to decline due to poor calf survival
- Calf survival is too low to reverse the decline
- Main cause of poor calf survival is predation
- Main predator is cougar



Things we heard

- Is habitat limiting?
 - Climate change
 - Fire
 - Changes in land management
- Is human disturbance an issue?
 - Shed hunting
 - Road closures



Background

Current cougar regulations

- ❑ 50 Population Management Units (PMUs)
 - Each comprised of 1 or more Game Management units
- ❑ General hunting season
 - Early season (Sept-Dec) and late season (Jan-Apr)
- ❑ Use cougar management guidelines
 - Harvesting at the estimate rate of growth to maintain a stable population (12-16%)



Background

Current cougar regulations



- Require mandatory harvest inspection for all successful hunters
- Field age estimation followed by laboratory aging



Background

Current cougar regulations

- Harvest guidelines for Blue Mountain PMUs

PMU	Hunt Area	12-16%¹	2021-2022 Harvest²
9	GMUs 145, 166, 175, 178	6-7	6
10	GMU's 149, 154, 157, 162, 163	7-9	9 ³
11	GMUs 169, 172, 181, 186	5-6	4

¹ adult only (age >2 years)

² based on field ages

³ closed Jan 21, 2022



Background

Summary

- ❑ To improve elk calf survival, we must address predation
- ❑ Among the options to address predation is to reduce the resident cougar population within the affected PMUs



Cougar Reduction options considered

- Agency removal
- Liberalize hunting seasons
 - Longer season
 - Increase or remove guidelines
 - Increase bag limit



Proposed Rule Changes WAC 220-415-100 Cougar Hunting Season and Regulations



Proposed changes

- ❑ Editorial change under section (2)
 - » Add the PMU number to each hunt area in the WAC
- ❑ Allow an individual to harvest a second cougar per license year in PMUs 9, 10, and 11 (Blue Mountains). (Section (4)(b))



Laura Rogers



Brenda Peoples



Proposed changes

- ❑ A second tag will be required to harvest a second cougar
- ❑ The second tag will be valid only for PMUs 9, 10, and 11 (Blue Mountains)



Anticipated effects

- Reduced cougar density in the short term
- Increased calf survival
- Continued monitoring of cougar harvest
- Continue monitoring of calf survival
- Assess the efficacy of this proposed action if adopted



Public Comment

Common Themes

- Oppose increasing cougar harvest
- Oppose hunting in general
- Support the proposal as stated
- Suggest a longer season
- Seek higher guidelines
- Desire for use of hounds



Summary

The proposed change to cougar hunting season and regulations

- Supports the mandate of the department, the commission, and the director
- Allows the department to use recreational hunters as a management tool
- Supports conservation of wildlife



Questions



Brian Kertson

