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News Release: Alberta Minister gives questionable cougar numbers, maintains conflicting ties to hunting industry

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Evidence suggests that the ties Minister of Forestry and Parks Todd Loewen maintains to the guide-outfitting industry are a conflict of interest with his role. This comes on the heels of the minister providing questionable cougar population numbers.

When asked about the recent [cougar hunting changes](#), the [minister stated](#) the management plan “indicates we want to keep a healthy population of cougars on the landscape of about 1,500 animals” and “presently we have about 2,000 cougars in the province.”

However, this estimate is over a decade out of date. The [2012 Cougar Management Plan](#) estimated that Alberta had a population of approximately 2,050 cougars, but the [2019 winter cougar season quota updates](#) by the province’s own biologists reassessed cougar abundance in Alberta and found a population of 1,559 cougars across the province. Cougar quotas in some areas [were reduced in 2022](#) to maintain target removal rates at 14 to 16 percent.

Additionally, contrary to the minister’s claims, the [Cougar Management Plan](#) sets an objective to “Maintain a viable population of **at least** 1,500 cougars on provincial lands in Alberta (emphasis added).” Based on the 2019 numbers, Alberta is already precariously close to the minimum viable population.

At the same time as the minister's decision to expand cougar hunting, the Wild Sheep Foundation is offering a bounty of up to \$7,000 on cougars. This year, they are offering a bonus of \$1,000 on female cougars, coinciding neatly with the minister's increase in female cougar quotas.

Female cougars spend **75 percent of their life expecting, nurturing and raising young**. That means any female hunted is likely to have cubs, and without their mother, these cubs usually starve. The increased female cougar quotas and bounty could cause rapid population decline.

"There is no evidence that the expansion of cougar hunting is appropriate or necessary for the current cougar population," says Ruiping Luo, conservation specialist with Alberta Wilderness Association, "As with other recent hunting changes, this decision was made without public consultation or supporting evidence. If the minister has any justification for this decision, it needs to be publicly shared."

As **The Narwhal reported on Dec. 2**, Minister Loewen's outfitting business (Red Willow Outfitters, based out of Valleyview) is now owned by his wife and son. His recent decisions, including increasing cougar quotas, favour guide-outfitters and are a direct conflict of interest with his present role as Minister of Forestry and Parks. He has stated that he and his family do not benefit from these decisions, yet his family is still closely involved in the outfitting business, and many outfitters likely benefit from the removal of predators on the landscape.

"When we dug into the minister's past with the Ethics Commissioner, we discovered that not only is his family, including his wife, still running his business, but also that the Ethics Commissioner originally denied him twice in his present role managing the province's wildlife," says John E. Marriott, co-founder of the Exposed Wildlife Conservancy.

Previous quotas were carefully established to manage the population and maintain a stable age structure and reduce conflict. These recent expansions go against years of science-based management. We demand Minister Loewen provide the data and rationale behind his recent hunting expansions.

Other facts:

- The female cougar quota was **more than doubled** this year. As of December 4, total cougar quota has increased to 133 from 96 in January of this year. This does not include guide-outfitter allocations, trapping and incidental mortality, which can make up **more than half** of human-caused cougar mortality in a year.
- In population biology, having high female quotas – equal to or greater than male quotas – is almost certain to result in population reduction. Even lower rates of harvest can create unstable age structures.
- Cougar hunting is shown to **increase conflict**. In Alberta, **problem cougar mortality** has decreased in recent years, following trends of cougar hunting. In other words, when cougar hunting is high, there were more conflicts by problem cougars, which then needed to be euthanized and removed. Data also shows the need to remove problem cougars has decreased as quotas were lowered.
- In the Management Goals and Objectives section of the **2012 Cougar Management Plan**, objectives are listed as using "a) Ensure that cougar predation on livestock and pets are reduced as much as possible by planned land management and agricultural development and by preventative livestock management. b) Reduce economic loss as a result of cougar predation by continuing the Wildlife Predator Compensation Program. c) Reduce the occurrence of chronic cougar problems on private lands by capture and translocation or euthanasia of offending individuals." There is no mention of increased hunting.
- According to the quotas posted to **My Wild Alberta**, one female cougar has already been harvested from Cypress Hills.
- Minister Loewen **removed the requirement** for quotas to be established before December 1 of the year they apply. This means cougar quotas can be changed at any time, without consultation or announcement.
- **Establishment of new Cougar Management Areas** was made as early as March, yet quotas were only changed in December, at the start of the hunting season. This gives concerned citizens no time to protest or argue the decision.
- As of November 2024, the use of **off-leash hunting dogs** is allowed for cougar hunting in Cypress Hills and Castle Provincial Park.
- Minister Loewen has been investigated for Conflict of Interest, and **he is still named** on Red Willow Outfitters' website. Although the business does not directly hunt cougars and

other predators targeted by this policy, they do hunt prey species that might be impacted by predator abundance, such as elk, deer, moose and waterfowl.

- This is the latest in several hunting changes made without public consultation and not based in science.

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