

California policy allows nonlethal response to mountain lion problems

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

For the first time, California state wildlife officials have clear rules in place to deal with problem mountain lions short of killing them.

On Friday, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife released a revised policy to respond to mountain lions that show up in urban areas, for example, and appear to pose a danger to the public. In the past, the department's only position in such incidents has been to eliminate the problem by killing the cougar.



Now, if a mountain lion has not already threatened or attacked a person or domestic animal, it will be considered a "potential human conflict" incident that allows a range of nonlethal responses.

The policy change follows an incident in Half Moon Bay on Dec. 1 in which state wildlife officers killed two mountain lion kittens that were hiding under a deck in a residential area. Necropsies later determined the two kittens were 4 months old, weighed only about 13 pounds, and had no food in their stomachs.

"With these new guidelines, they've added a whole new category where it gives them the option to slow down and take some other course," said Tim Dunbar, executive director of the

Mountain Lion Foundation, a Sacramento-based nonprofit. "This is a good step forward. We believe it's something that's been needed for some time."

California is unique in the nation in its management of mountain lions, thanks to a 1990 ballot measure, Proposition 117, in which state voters declared cougars a protected species exempt from hunting.

Since then, mountain lions have been killed only when they pose a danger to people or domestic animals.

Since 1910, there have been 15 verified attacks by mountain lions against people in California. Of those, five have been fatal.

The revised policy still states that mountain lions may be killed if they threaten or kill people or domestic animals. This is done under a "depredation" permit issued by the Department of Fish and Wildlife, which is limited in time and geography.

Now, the policy defines "potential human conflict" incidents as those "that could reasonably be perceived as having potential to cause severe injury or death to humans."

In such cases, state wildlife officials now have the leeway to respond by hazing the cougar with rubber bullets; a beanbag, Taser or tranquilizer gun; pepper spray; or trained dogs. They also may capture, rehabilitate and relocate problem mountain lions.

"This gives responders a better understanding of what to do and how to deal with it," said Jordan Traverso, a spokeswoman for the Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The policy notes that state law does not authorize the department to rehabilitate mountain lions or to work with nonprofit groups for that purpose or to capture or haze

mountain lions.

For that reason, Traverso said, the policy is considered a draft that will be amended if state law grants new powers.

A bill introduced in January by Sen. Jerry Hill, D-San Mateo, would do just that. The bill, SB132, would allow the department to work with other government agencies, universities and nonprofits on nonlethal means to manage mountain lions.