



# Declining deer herds spark debate

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By Jeff DeLong, USA TODAY



By Candice Towell, Reno Gazette-Journal

Sean Shea, of the U.S. Geological Survey, lowers a mountain lion from a tree.

RENO — Declining western deer herds have biologists, sportsman groups and environmentalists clashing over whether mountain lions and coyotes are largely to blame and should pay with their lives.

On one side are those who believe the number of deer predators should be reduced through targeted hunting programs. Others say factors such as the loss of natural habitat and wildfires are the issue.

It's an emotional debate, says Jim Heffelfinger,

regional game specialist with the [Arizona](#) Game and Fish Department.

"The scenario plays out in just about every state, Heffelfinger says. "When these things flare up, they're white hot."

That's the case now in [Nevada](#), where the issue of killing lions and coyotes that prey on deer has state Department of Wildlife officials at odds with a governor-appointed commission that oversees them.

Nevada's mule deer numbered about 106,000 in 2009, down from a high of 240,000 in 1988, according to state estimates. Mule deer, characterized by their large, mule-like ears, are common throughout the western United States.

"We've got a war going on," says Cecil Fredi, president of Hunter's Alert, one of two hunters groups that petitioned the Nevada Wildlife Commission to approve three predator-control projects last December. It did so against the advice of department Director Ken Mayer and his biologists, who said killing mountain lions and coyotes was not scientifically justified.

Officials with the [U.S. Department of Agriculture's](#) Wildlife Services, which has the final say, refused to proceed. Doing so without full support of state wildlife officials would put them in an "untenable position," says Jeff Green, director of the western region for Wildlife Services.

State biologists say the deer's troubles are not due to predators but to continuing loss of habitat from development, wildfire and invading non-native grasses.

Tony Wasley, Nevada's mule deer specialist, says

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when lack of habitat is the problem, "all the predator control in the world won't result in any benefit."

Gerald Lent, chairman of the Nevada Wildlife Commission, says predators are an important part of Nevada's mule deer problems and addressing them is "long overdue."

The issue is also heating up in Arizona and Oregon. Arizona's mule deer number about 120,000, half the size of the herd in 1986, according to the Arizona Game and Fish Department.

Oregon's mule deer numbered 216,154 in 2009, down from 256,000 in 1990, according to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Duane Dungannon, state coordinator of the Oregon Hunters Association, says that even though mountain lion hunting is allowed year-round, "it's not even putting a dent in the state's cougar population."

"It's no longer that uncommon to bump into a cougar when you're deer or elk hunting, but it's becoming more uncommon to run into a deer or elk," he says.

Brooks Fahy, executive director of the non-profit Predator Defense, based in Eugene, Ore., worries the state's cougar population is "crashing" because of year-round hunting.

*DeLong reports for the Reno Gazette-Journal.*

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