SB 5960/HB 2221: Contrary to science and bad for ungulates, carnivores, and people

SB 5960 and HB 2221 manufacture a crisis as an excuse to target endangered (and declining) wolves and other carnivores, falsely blaming them for perceived declines in deer and other ungulate populations, and ignoring their vital role in preserving ungulate health and improving public safety.

1. Washington wild ungulate populations are not declining: Both bills are based on the premise that Washington's wild ungulate populations are in trouble and require urgent intervention. This is false, according to the results of the 5-year Predator-Prey Project by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) and the University of Washington, a study commissioned by the legislature to investigate the impact of wolves and other carnivores on ungulate populations. In a November 2025 presentation, project researchers told the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission that white-tailed deer populations are "stable to slightly declining" and elk populations are increasing at roughly 10% per year. These findings are consistent with WDFW's 2024 Status & Trends Report, which shows that the state's mule deer and elk populations are generally stable.

2. Predators are not driving ungulate population trends: Even when ungulate populations decline, the Predator-Prey Project concluded that carnivores are not the primary cause. Researchers told the Commission last November that carnivores are not causing declines in wild ungulate populations, and that human-caused factors, such as habitat destruction and vehicle collisions, play a much larger role in shaping population trends. The study further concluded that wolves did not have a significant effect on ungulate population growth rates.

3. Killing predators does not restore ungulate populations: Science is clear that killing predators does not lead to sustained recovery of wild ungulate populations, particularly where declines are driven by habitat and other human-caused factors. The Predator-Prey Project concluded that "predator control would have limited value for boosting ungulate populations in these systems." Instead, researchers said managers should focus on improving summer forage availability to increase ungulate populations. These results are consistent with decades of research, including recent long-term studies, showing that killing large carnivores is ineffective at increasing wild ungulate populations or improving hunting outcomes. SB 5960 and HB 2221 would scapegoat carnivores for ungulate declines caused by habitat loss and degradation and other human-caused factors, risking further ecological harm.

4. Reducing predator populations could increase vehicle collisions: Predator-Prey Project researchers suggested that one way to help ungulate populations would be to take steps to reduce vehicle collisions, since vehicle strikes account for nearly **14 percent of documented juvenile deer deaths** and **at least one-fifth of adult female mortalities**. Notably, studies show that increased wolf populations decrease vehicle collisions with deer, reducing the number of deer killed by vehicles as well as saving human lives.

5. Carnivores maintain ungulate health: Last year's confirmation of chronic wasting disease (CWD) in Washington underscores the vital role predators play in maintaining ungulate health. Scientific studies show that large carnivores such as wolves and cougars limit the spread of CWD by selectively preying on infected deer and elk, removing infected animals and reducing the spread of the disease. Allowing predators to perform this natural ecological function may be one of the most effective, low-cost tools for protecting ungulates from this terrible disease, making bills like SB 5960 and HB 2221 ultimately harmful to ungulate populations.

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