

Pumas that kill pets, livestock win a reprieve

Fish and Wildlife says mountain lions will no longer get automatic death sentence.

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Mountain lions that kill pets and livestock in Southern California will no longer be automatically targeted for death.

The state Department of Fish and Wildlife is changing the policy that granted ranchers and others automatic depredation permits for marauding cats. Now, the applicant must first try nonlethal methods to scare away or keep out the cougar, the Sacramento Bee reported Wednesday.

A permit would be issued only after two nonlethal attempts.

The policy applies to the Santa Monica and Santa Ana mountain ranges in Southern California, where small and genetically isolated populations of cougars are hemmed in by freeways and are at risk of dying out.

California issues more than 200 depredation permits a year, although typically fewer than half result in kills, the Bee reported. However, in the Santa Ana

ranges, a 13-year study showed that more than a quarter of the cougars were killed from depredation permits, the paper said.

The policy came under fire in 2016 after a Malibu rancher received a permit to shoot a mountain lion that had killed nearly a dozen alpacas. The 150-pound cat was believed to be a radio-tagged male dubbed P-45.

Animal lovers flooded the Facebook page of the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area after the kill permit was issued.

Eventually, volunteers with the Mountain Lion Foundation helped build pens to keep the alpacas safe.

The state policy shift was praised by conservationists but opposed by livestock owners.

Wendell Phillips, husband of the Malibu rancher Victoria Vaughn-Perling, grazed P-45 in the spring of 2016 before the kill permit was issued.

"I think they're bowing to political pressure, and it's too bad," Phillips said of wildlife officials. "But the reality is nobody will bother to apply for permits anymore. Shoot, shovel and shut up, that's what is coming."