



April 10, 2020

Mr. Eric Sklar, President  
California Fish and Game Commission  
1416 Ninth Street, Suite 1320  
Sacramento, CA 95814

Submitted via email to [fgc@fgc.ca.gov](mailto:fgc@fgc.ca.gov)

RE: Petition to list Southern California and Central Coast mountain lions as threatened under the California Endangered Species Act – support advancement to candidacy

Dear President Sklar and Commissioners:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the petition to list Southern California and Central Coast mountain lions as threatened under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA).

The undersigned organizations, which represent millions of supporters throughout California, strongly support the recommendation of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife that listing of mountain lions in Southern California and along the Central Coast may be warranted. We urge the Commission to initiate a full status review and advance the mountain lion populations in the entire area of the proposed evolutionarily significant unit (ESU) to candidacy.

Lack of connectivity is the primary driver of what scientists have termed an “extinction vortex” for several mountain lion populations in California. Humans have extended roads and development into mountain lion habitat with little regard of their movement needs, which has led to the formation of dangerously isolated populations with poor genetic health and high levels of human-caused mortalities, including car strikes, depredation kills, rodenticide poisonings, disease, and wildfires<sup>1,2,3</sup>. If nothing is done to preserve remaining corridors and enhance connectivity at existing barriers, scientists predict that the Santa Ana and Santa Monica mountains populations could become extinct within 50 years or less. If inbreeding depression occurs, scientists predict these populations could disappear within 12-15 years<sup>2</sup>.

Other populations within the proposed ESU, including those in the Santa Cruz, San Gabriel, and San Bernardino Mountains, are showing similar patterns of an extinction vortex<sup>1,4</sup>. Despite the large areas of open space and suitable mountain lion habitat in the Santa Cruz Mountains, roads and development have been shown to be formidable barriers for mountain lion

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<sup>1</sup> Gustafson, K.D., Gagne, R.B., Vickers, T.W., Riley, S.P., Wilmers, C.C., Bleich, V.C., Pierce, B.M., Kenyon, M., Drazenovich, T.L., Sikich, J.A. and Boyce, W.M., 2018. Genetic source-sink dynamics among naturally structured and anthropogenically fragmented puma populations. *Conservation Genetics*, 20(2), pp.215-227.

<sup>2</sup> Benson, J. F., Mahoney, P. J., Vickers, T. W., Sikich, J. A., Beier, P., Riley, S. P., ... & Boyce, W. M. (2019). Extinction vortex dynamics of top predators isolated by urbanization. *Ecological Applications*, 29(3), e01868

<sup>3</sup> Benson, J. F., Sikich, J. A., & Riley, S. P. (2020). Survival and competing mortality risks of mountain lions in a major metropolitan area. *Biological Conservation*, 241, 108294.

<sup>4</sup> Saremi, N. F., Supple, M. A., Byrne, A., Cahill, J. A., Coutinho, L. L., Dalén, L., ... & O'Connell, B. (2019). Puma genomes from North and South America provide insights into the genomic consequences of inbreeding. *Nature Communications*, 10(1), 1-10.

connectivity and gene flow. Building wildlife crossings and preserving natural corridors have to be a priority at every level of government. Protections under CESA that would improve habitat connectivity between the isolated populations and throughout the entire proposed ESU area are needed to ensure these magnificent big cats continue to inhabit these landscapes and inspire future generations.

Protecting mountain lions would benefit not only the species itself, but also imperiled wildlife and plants that are the cornerstone of California's unique biodiversity. The presence of this wide-ranging top predator has been shown to help promote watershed health and maintain diverse habitats that support a multitude of fish, amphibian, reptile, bird, mammal, insect, and invertebrate species. And mountain lion kills provide an important source of food for numerous scavengers and opportunists. Loss of the species could potentially lead to degraded ecosystems and decreased biodiversity.

Affording protections to mountain lions would also benefit public health and safety. About 100 mountain lions are killed on California roads every year, and thousands of collisions with large mammals (mostly deer) are reported to state agencies and insurance companies annually. Protecting mountain lions by facilitating their safe passage over roads would improve gene flow among isolated populations and allow for the safer passage of many other animals, like deer, which would help to reduce wildlife vehicle collisions.

The well-being of mountain lions is linked with ecosystem function and public health and safety, but the species is facing unprecedented threats to long-term survival. We therefore strongly urge the California Fish and Game Commission to accept the Department's recommendation that listing may be warranted and advance Southern California and Central Coast mountain lions to candidacy.

Sincerely,

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