
KCET REWILD

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A bobcat stakes out a gopher hole in Marin County | Photo: Len Blumin/Flickr/Creative Commons License

California Bans Bobcat Trapping in 3-2 Vote

The California Fish and Game Commission voted 3-2 Wednesday to ban bobcat trapping everywhere in California. The vote, which took place at the Commission's regular meeting in Fortuna, caps a controversy that started when a Joshua Tree resident found traps illegally placed on his land less than a mile from the National Park.

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A bobcat on the move | Photo: © Peggy Faranda

Concern over the threat to bobcats in Joshua Tree and elsewhere in the state prompted the California Legislature to pass AB1213, the Bobcat Protection Act of 2013, which directed the Fish and Game Commission to establish trapping-free buffer zones around national parks, wildlife preserves, and other areas where trapping is already prohibited.

After studying a pair of proposals for those buffer zones' boundaries, the Commission voted in a narrow majority to adopt so-called "Option 2," which essentially declared the entire state a buffer zone in which trapping is prohibited.

California bobcats had come under increasing pressure from trappers in recent years as a combination of fashion trends and illegality of other cat furs increased the global price for bobcat pelts.

"The vote today is historic and shows California's national leadership in wildlife protection," said Camilla Fox of the group Project Coyote, which had worked to promote both the Bobcat Protection Act and the more extensive buffer zone proposal. "This victory will

help protect California's native bobcats from the insatiable international fur market where individual bobcat pelts can sell for as much as \$1,000 per pelt."

The vote came after Fox delivered a petition with more than 30,000 signatures in favor of a total ban.

Observers had been far from certain about the outcome of Wednesday's vote, as two of the Commissioners who voted for the statewide ban -- Anthony C. Williams of Huntington Beach and Eric Sklar of St. Helena in Napa County -- were attending their first meeting as Commissioners, and thus had little track record on wildlife issues. They were joined in their vote for a statewide ban by Commission president Jack Bayliss of Los Angeles.

Commissioners Jim Kellogg of Contra Costa County and Jacque Hostler-Carmesin of Humboldt County voted against the statewide ban.

Though the number of bobcat trappers in California has been steadily dwindling since the 1970s as the sport goes out of fashion, individual trappers had been taking more cats in recent years as a partial result of the boost in the

potential financial gain from bobcat pelts. Trapping advocates opposed both the statewide ban and Option 1, which would have banned trapping in about half the state. The California Trappers Association had asked the Commission to delay a decision until the state's Department of Fish and Wildlife could complete a bobcat population census, which hasn't been done for 36 years.

Wednesday's vote protecting all of California's bobcats wasn't what Tom O'Key imagined when he found a trap in 2013 that had been illegally placed in a rock pile on land he owns near the National Park in Joshua Tree. His find, reported to local media in the area, generated a firestorm of opposition to trapping. A local group, Project Bobcat, organized to support a legislative ban, and a broad coalition of groups from Project Coyote and the Center for Biological Diversity to national humane groups lent their full support.

Reached in Fortuna in the wake of the vote, O'Key admitted to KCET that he was celebrating. "I feel liberated," he said. "I never had an inkling that it all would end up this way."