

April 10, 2025 email from Commissioner Shortsleeve

Dear Chair Sheldon:

Thank you for reaching out earlier today, I appreciate it. And I apologize for the difficulty that's occurred while trying to schedule a time for the department to come in for testimony on H. 473. This week has been extremely busy with several all-day meetings for many people in the wildlife division (myself included) and I was under the impression that we had been waiting for dates for next week to be offered. I apologize for any miscommunication on our part.

I agree with your assessment of the wildlife division feeling overwhelmed right now and that we all could use something positive to focus on. I share your sentiment that advancing conversations and proactively engaging on uniting topics is a huge need right now. In that vein, I really appreciate having the opportunity to discuss the department's thoughts on reintroducing catamounts to Vermont.

However, we do have some serious concerns about the proposed feasibility study that I feel need to be addressed during such a conversation. In brief, some of our concerns are as follows:

1. A feasibility study on a complex topic like the reintroduction of a top-level predator to a highly developed place like Vermont is time-consuming and expensive. We have used a process known as structured decision-making that was developed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for topics exactly like this and it requires high engagement from numerous experts in the field of predator ecology, along with all affected interest groups which would be akin to what we're working on for Act 59 planning. This process takes years to complete and can be expensive. We have staff who have been trained in the structured decision-making process and we are currently using it to develop a plan for how to manage chronic wasting disease in the event it impacts our wild deer and moose populations in Vermont. It is a significant commitment involving multiple staff, outside experts, numerous stakeholders, and in this case, our neighboring states and provinces.
2. As you know, catamounts are a wide-ranging carnivore and would not be confined to Vermont. If released in Vermont, these animals will travel into neighboring New York, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Maine, Quebec, and beyond. Any reintroduction effort must be contemplated through regionwide collaboration, and all affected states and provinces would need to be part of a feasibility study. Director of Wildlife John Austin has begun reaching out to his counterparts in the neighboring states and Quebec to get an understanding of their interest in such an effort. He has also asked that this be discussed at the Northeast Fish and Wildlife Conference directors meeting later this month. Understanding the level of interest and potential support seems necessary before investing considerable resources into a feasibility study. We're happy to report back on what we learn from our neighboring states and Quebec.
3. Making a significant investment in this topic assumes that reintroducing catamounts should become a high wildlife conservation priority amidst the myriad pressing wildlife conservation priorities confronting our native wildlife. We have numerous species of plants and animals along with natural communities and habitats that would benefit from more attention and resources right now. As one example, the spread of disease in wildlife is

becoming more widespread and complex requiring a higher level of expertise. One of our top priorities is to create a wildlife veterinary position in the department to enable us to better understand, prevent and respond to this serious issue in everything from birds and mammals to reptiles and amphibians. Another example is the recovery of our declining bat populations, grassland bird populations, and invertebrates (e.g., butterflies and dragonflies). In other words, directing resources to an extirpated top-level predator, even with added resources, will impact our ability to support the conservation needs of species that exist in Vermont currently. It also has the potential to create false expectations that we will ultimately release catamounts onto the Vermont landscape and while that would be years down the road the result would be the department putting resources into responding to citizen complaints regarding threats to pets, livestock, or human safety. As you know, we invest enormous resources into addressing bear/human conflicts (that could be a program in-and-of-itself).

My staff have met with representatives from the organization Panthera and have engaged in thoughtful discussions on this topic. We have not dismissed this idea altogether. There are other leading scientists who have worked on reintroduction projects for large predators who could be informative to this discussion. We have reached out to colleagues who would be excellent to speak with your committee, and we are just waiting for their (and their supervisor's) approval to share their contact information with the committee.

As you heard, I was disappointed this morning to learn that there is a potential of having H. 473 added into our larger policy bill, H. 230. And as you also know, I am strongly supportive of H. 230, the passing of which would result in important conservation benefits to Vermont's wildlife and people that we have tried to advance during the past 2 legislative sessions. While I do not want to lose the opportunity to advance our policy initiatives, I am having trouble putting my support behind a concept that will also inevitably redirect significant resources from other pressing wildlife conservation challenges. I hope you can understand that conflict and consider keeping these two bill separate as the conversation around catamount reintroduction continues.

All to say, we are happy to engage in a conversation about this idea, but feel like there needs to be a more robust discussion with the inclusion of some additional voices before there is legislation directing the department to embark on a feasibility study of this nature.

I look forward to the opportunity of having me and my staff speak with your committee next week.

Respectfully,
Andrea

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