Leghold Traps and Snares
A Discussion of the Proposed Ban
(Oregon Ballot Measure 5, November 1980)

The initiative petition to ban the use of snare and leghold traps in Oregon will be on the November 4 general election ballot as Measure 5.

The measure is complex and has generated much discussion. The following are answers to major questions raised by the proposed ban. A thorough treatment of these questions appeared in the October 1980 issue of the OSU Extension Service newsletter, Oregon Wildlife Update.

What Would Ballot Measure 5 Do?
Essentially, the measure would prohibit the taking of furbearing mammals for recreation or commerce, effective November 1980. It would prohibit the use of leghold traps, snares, and the conibear (kill-type body-grip) trap to control damages by ground squirrels, nutria, muskrats, and boomers (also known as mountain beavers), effective November 1980. The measure also would prohibit the use of leghold traps and snares to control losses of livestock by coyotes, bobcats, and bears after 1985. Until 1985, it would require that a special permit be obtained from the Department of Agriculture, after losses are documented, for the use of traps or snares to control these losses.

What role do traps and snares perform in animal damage control programs?
In programs to control damages by predators of livestock, government trappers usually are called in after the livestock grower has had a loss and other control methods (lethal and non-lethal) have failed to keep losses below an acceptable level.

A 1977 State of Washington survey of Pacific Northwest forests showed that trapping boomers with the conibear trap was used by 80 percent of the managers of forestlands to control boomer damage to Douglas-fir trees. Other methods include protecting the seedlings with plastic tubes (Vexar) and burning regeneration sites to remove essential food and cover.

In the resolution of animal damage problems in Oregon, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service report says traps and snares were used by government trappers for removing 46 percent of the offending predatory animals and aerial gunning was used to remove 40 percent. Denning (7 percent), shooting (4 percent), calling and using dogs (3 percent) were used for the remainder. Of the 1,542 nonpredatory pest animals (beaver, nutria, boomer, opossum, porcupine, raccoon and skunk) removed by federal trappers, 98 percent were taken by snares, leghold traps, or bodygrip traps.

Are animal damage control programs effective?
The federal program that helps livestock growers in Oregon reduce losses to predation cost $1,024,735 in 1979. In 1979 approximately 18,600 sheep and 5,700 cattle were lost to predation under the current program, utilizing traps and snares as well as other control methods. Multiplying by current costs at slaughter gives a value of $2,853,200. Using data collected in five OSU studies of sheep ranches in western U.S., and adding an estimate for cattle, it is estimated that if there were no control program, losses could be as high as $4,194,200—slightly more than four times the cost of the current federal program.

The 1977 Washington survey showed that boomers damaged Douglas-fir seedlings on about 275,000 acres in western Oregon, Washington, and northern California. Trapping was felt to be highly effective by 39 percent of the survey respondents and partially effective by 48 percent of the respondents.
Are there non-lethal alternatives to traps and snares?

Of the non-lethal methods for controlling damages to livestock by predators, fencing and guard dogs have the greatest potential. They are promising under conditions where they can be employed. Fencing is especially useful in the small pastures typical of western Oregon, but would be less useful in eastern Oregon under open range grazing.

Sheep growers feel that while fences can reduce losses, they still require the use of alternative methods such as the trap to catch coyotes that defeat the fence and cause sheep losses.

Results with placing guard dogs on ranches are mixed. Some ranchers cannot work with the dogs (or vice versa) and get rid of them. Some dogs harass or even kill sheep. The emerging trend, however, is that use of the dogs often is correlated with an acceptable reduction of loss in sheep to coyotes and dogs.

How is recreational/commercial trapping regulated?

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife has kept records of individual furbearing species trapped for the past 56 years. The data include number of animals trapped, number of trappers, square miles of habitat per furbearer species in Oregon, and the number of animals trapped per square mile. Managers evaluate short- and long-term trends in number of animals trapped, and potential number of furbearers for available habitat as important components of the system for regulating trapping.

For the 1979-80 trapping season, 3,551 Oregon trappers caught 45,041 muskrats, 11,611 nutrias, 11,148 beavers, 10,775 coyotes, 8,091 raccoons, 5,557 opossums, 3,694 bobcats, 2,778 skunks, 1,466 minks, 775 badgers, 670 red foxes, 558 otters, 440 grey foxes, 150 weasels, and 93 martens. At average fur prices, this harvest was worth approximately $1,711,000.

The Department limits the number of bobcats per trapper to three for eastern Oregon. No trap limits are imposed for bobcats or other furbearers in western Oregon. Most trappers catch only a few numbers of each species. If it is determined that the potential exists for too many furbearers of a given species to be taken by trappers, the Department modifies seasons by shortening their length and closing trapping in certain parts of the state.

How are traps and snares used in wildlife management?

Traps are used to reduce numbers of muskrats and nutrias in locales where they damage dikes, threatening waterfowl nesting areas and agricultural lands.

Predators of waterfowl nests and young (primarily coyotes, foxes, skunks, and badgers) can cause a significant reduction in number of waterfowl hatched and successfully fledged on Fish and Wildlife Service National Refuges. Trapping is one of a few methods permitted for removing predators from refuges.

Coyotes cause high mortality in antelope and mule deer fawns in Oregon. Studies have shown that where intensive predator controls (aerial gunning, poisoning, trapping, and snaring) are exercised and numbers of predators are substantially reduced, deer and antelope fawns show much higher survival to adult age. However, these programs are costly and must be repeated yearly to prevent a population explosion of coyotes. An associated question is whether the habitat can support all the extra deer and antelope that would have been killed by coyote prelation.

The Oregon State Health Division has maintained a plague-surveillance program for many years that utilizes information on coyotes and badgers caught by trappers to pinpoint areas that humans and their pets should avoid. This information is given to physicians and hospitals and to the public through newspapers and television.

Do traps and snares kill non-target wildlife?

Last year traps and snares were used to capture 4,494 (76 percent) target animals and 1,431 (24 percent) non-target animals in the Federal Animal Damage Control program for Oregon. Of non-target animals caught, 551, (39 percent) were released, leaving 880 (61 percent) that were destroyed. Most of the non-target animals destroyed were opossums (61 percent) and skunks (19 percent). Raccoons (8 percent), porcupines (6 percent), bobcats (3 percent), badgers (2 percent), and foxes and nutrias (1 percent) comprised the rest.

Records for the Alsea Ranger District of the Siuslaw National Forest indicate that 1,204 boomers (97 percent) and 39 non-target animals (3 percent) were captured during 1979-80. Composition of non-target animals captured was not recorded but likely was comprised primarily of brush rabbits and weasels.

Numbers of non-target animals destroyed by traps, snares, and bodygrip traps in animal damage control programs comprise less than 0.1 percent of probable statewide populations in Oregon. The loss of these animals does not pose any threat to native populations.

Do traps and snares cause pain and suffering?

There are no known studies that objectively measure the amount of pain animals caught in snare or leghold traps are subjected to. It is obvious that animals so caught undergo some form of physical discomfort.
**Would the ban cover all traps?**

Proponents state that the measure exempts the sale and use of mouse, rat, and gopher traps, as well as live “box” traps, from the ban. Opponents state that legal definitions contained in the measure actually would require persons who wish to use rat, mouse, gopher, or “box” traps to obtain a permit for their use from the State Department of Agriculture.

The matter of a permit being required to use mouse, rat, gopher traps, and “box” traps is unresolved and probably would have to be settled by the State Attorney General. Clearly, Measure 5 bans the use of mole traps.

**What if Measure 5 passes?**

Approximately 3,550 trappers would have at least some of their income eliminated and approximately $1.7 to $2 million in income generated by the sale of pelts would be lost to Oregon’s economy.

Livestock growers would be inconvenienced by the increased administration required to conduct the permit system, and would suffer higher losses because of the time lag between the time of loss, verification of loss, application for, and granting of the permit to allow trapping to be used. There would be no trapping allowed to control other pests previously trapped by government trappers.

If non-lethal or other methods don’t replace the trap and snare by 1985, there would be increased losses of livestock.

License and tag fees for trapping generated $93,352 in 1979-80. These funds, for management of the trapping program (including data collection for trapping and life history data), and for research projects on furbearers would be lost.

Trapping for control of damages by boomers to Douglas-fir seedlings would have to be replaced by the use of costlier Vexar tubing around the trees. Projecting the known costs at the Siuslaw National Forest against a conservative one-third for Oregon of the 275,000 acres shown damaged by boomers in the 1977 PNW survey, yields an estimate of at least $12 million as the cost of replacement.

The plague surveillance program in Oregon would be eliminated or replaced by a more costly program.

There would be no pain and suffering to target or non-target wildlife attributable to the use of traps and snares. There would be no loss of non-target wildlife unintentionally caught in traps and snares.

**What if Measure 5 fails?**

Trapping of wildlife for recreation and commercial purposes would continue.

Trapping as a tool for animal damage control work would be retained. The plague surveillance program would continue.

Trapping as a tool for managing wildlife and for collecting basic life history information on furbearers and other wildlife would continue.

More than 1,000 non-target wildlife a year would be destroyed. Some of the approximately 85,000 target and non-target animals caught in traps and snares would undergo some form of physical discomfort.

**What is the choice?**

Essentially the choice is between 1) discomfort of animals caught in traps and the loss of non-target animals accidentally caught in traps and snares; and 2) actual or potential increases in costs of animal damage control programs and losses to livestock and timber industries; actual and potential loss of information useful for managing wildlife species; and loss of a limited number of jobs and income generated by the fur trapping industry.

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