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**Date:** 1/18/2006  
**Article Title:** Poison ban to help cougars  
**Media Source:** [LA Daily News \(California\)](#)



City officials consider curbs on anti-rodent chemicals

By Kerry Cavanaugh, Staff Writer

Hoping to protect the few remaining mountain lions that roam the region's hillsides, officials are considering banning the city's use of rodent poisons blamed in at least two larger-animal deaths, plus the countless coyotes and smaller animals they eat.

The proposal by Councilman Greig Smith would prohibit city departments from using four anticoagulant poisons at golf courses, parks and facilities within two miles of mountain regions.

The poisons, known as rodenticides, prevent blood clotting and slowly kill mice, rats, and gophers by causing them to bleed to death internally.

But the anticoagulants have been implicated in the deaths of mountain lions, foxes, bobcats and eagles that eat the smaller, poisoned rodents.

"The whole idea that these poisons that were supposed to take care of a rodent population are potentially moving up the food chain is a scary thing," said Nicole Bernson, senior policy adviser with Smith's office.

"It's about preserving species that are indigenous to these areas."

The chemicals of concern - brodifacoum, bromadiolone, diphacinone and difethialone - have been in use for more than two decades.

In late 2004, wildlife ecologist Seth Riley found two of the four adult mountain lions he was tracking in the Santa Monica Mountains and Simi Hills died of internal bleeding, probably after eating coyotes or other critters that had eaten poisoned rodents.

He has also found anticoagulants in dead coyotes and bobcats.

"We're finding a lot of this stuff in the wildlife and we're finding it all the way up to mountain lions, and it's definitely affecting them," Riley said. "From a wildlife perspective, the less of this stuff that is out there, the better."

Riley and pesticide experts believe the anticoagulants originate with rat traps used by homeowners and public agencies. The chemicals are found in some rodenticides sold at local home improvement stores.

City officials said they should be able to comply with Smith's request, which will be discussed today at the Council's Environment and Waste Management Committee.

Teresa Prosewicz, principal forester with the city Recreation and Parks Department,

said workers use only one product with the problem anticoagulants, and it's primarily for indoor rodent control. The department could switch to a new product for the facilities near the mountains with little problem.

"There will be some impact but we can accommodate," Prosewicz said.

Likewise, the General Services Department, which oversees the city's two pest control contracts, would ask those contractors to stop using anticoagulants in the

mountain areas.

Ventura County officials also have attempted to curtail the use of anticoagulants by county agencies. Supervisor Linda Parks will seek a complete phaseout of the products within six months.

Assemblywoman Fran Pavley, D-Woodland Hills, tried unsuccessfully last year to change state law and allow counties to ban the sale of anticoagulant poisons, but she is working to develop new rules aimed at keeping anticoagulants out of the food chain.

The state could limit the rodenticides to indoor use only, so the poisoned critters are less likely to be eaten by wildlife, or require a professional license to purchase the chemicals to ensure they are used safely.

Karen Cotton with the Mountain Lion Foundation said her group supports efforts to limit the use of anticoagulants.

"It's really a cruel way to die. We try to tell people to read the label. If it has one of the four products on the list, move on to the next product. There's plenty of choices out there."

Kerry Cavanaugh, (818) 713-3746

kerry.cavanaugh@dailynews.com

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