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Don't water down bill on poaching

● **AT ISSUE:** The state Senate has passed a bill supported by the Division of Wildlife that would make poaching a felony on the first offense. The Assembly is debating an amendment to the bill.

● **OUR TAKE:** The amendment, which would allow the poaching of a single animal to remain a misdemeanor on the first offense, would weaken the bill. The Senate version should be passed unchanged.

Records kept by the Nevada Division of Wildlife show that in 2002, poachers killed 29 deer, nine elk, and one big horn sheep. Additionally, a half-dozen cases were brought against individuals suspected of poaching black bear. Those numbers might seem low, until compared with numerous studies in the United States and Canada concluding that for every poacher caught, there are 99 who are not caught.

In Nevada the ratio is likely far worse because there are far fewer game wardens. Nationally, the state average is one game warden for every 750 square miles. Nevada has only 34 game wardens to patrol 110,000 square miles, meaning that our ratio is one game warden for every 3,235 square miles. And it gets worse. Nevada's game wardens also teach boating safety, effectively reducing the number of wardens available for field work to the equivalent of 19.

Given the state's financial crisis, any significant increase in wardens would be too much to hope for. But a tougher law against poaching, as proposed in Senate Bill 135, wouldn't cost the state a cent. The Senate has passed the bill, which makes the "willful" (as opposed to a legitimate hunter who mistakes one animal for another) and illegal killing of an animal a felony rather than a misdemeanor. In addition to stiffening the penalties against convicted poachers, a felony charge would also enable extradition proceedings if the poacher lived outside of Nevada. The bill is now in the Assembly, which is debating a proposed amendment that would retain the misdemeanor charge against a poacher for the first offense of killing a single animal. We think this unnecessarily weakens the bill. Poaching is a serious crime and should be treated as such, even on the first offense.

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