The state Game, Fish & Parks Commission will today propose a mountain lion season for next winter that could kill up to 100 lions, after learning on Thursday that its wildlife staff had been underestimating the cougar population in the Black Hills.

The GF&P Wildlife Division staff now believes there are about 300 mountain lions in the Black Hills region, about 100 more than it estimated before the 2012 lion season that began in January. Hunters killed 73 lions in two months during the regular season, by far the highest kill since the season began in 2005.

The additional lion kill and data from lions wearing tracking collars inspired a review and revision of the lion population estimate by the GF&P staff.

"Our estimate is now 300," said John Kanta, regional game manager for GF&P in Rapid City. "With the increased lion harvest this year and the increased number of collars out there, we were able to really get a good estimate of the population. When we put that all together, it did show an estimate higher than we projected."

That helped drive the GF&P staff to recommend a lion season next winter that would begin Dec. 26 and run through March. It also would raise the lion kill quota from 70 overall or 50 female lions to 100 lions overall or 70 females.

The season closes if either quota is reached before the closing date.

The GF&P staff is also recommending that the commission authorize a limited number of hunters to hunt with hounds in Custer State Park. It would be the first authorized use of hounds for lion hunting since the season began seven years ago.

GF&P has not allowed hound hunting for lions, although some have pushed for it. Kanta said the expanses of public land in the 71,000-acre park would reduce the possibility of problems with hounds trespassing on private land and wouldn't cause a great disturbance of park wildlife.

The use of hounds, however, could help increase the lion kill in the park, where research indicates that the big cats have been feeding frequently on elk calves.

"The thought was this would be a good way to get some additional harvest inside the park without causing great disturbance," Kanta said.

Most hunters in the park would not be allowed to use dogs.
Despite the revised population estimate on lions, Kanta said the staff still believes the population is trending down. That is largely because of increased kill quotas on lions set by the commission in recent years.

"We still see it as a decreasing population," Kanta said. "All of our models show a decrease."

But it's a decrease from a higher number than the staff previously thought, he said.

The commission will make its lion season proposal today, with the option of accepting the staff recommendation or doing something else. But that's only the first step. The commission will actually set the season during its Oct. 4-5 meeting, following a public hearing that is likely to be well-attended.

GF&P will accept comments on the proposal.

"There's going to be plenty to talk about," Kanta said.