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The battle over predators

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A federal judge has delivered a sharp rebuke to a controversial federal agency that planned to increase killing of wolves in Washington state, ordering it to put its plans on hold.

But the court decision does little to deal with ongoing complaints of needless slaughter and cruelty to animals by Wildlife Services employees or to pierce the veil of secrecy surrounding many of the agency's activities.

Wildlife Services is part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which describes it as a "predator damage management program" whose mission is to "provide federal leadership and expertise to resolve wildlife conflicts to allow people and wildlife to coexist."

Critics describe it as a secretive, out-of-control agency that kills millions of animals a year, often at the behest of ranchers, without proof that the killing is necessary or useful.

In the last fiscal year, for example, Wildlife Services killed 323 gray timber wolves, almost 62,000 coyotes, 580 black bears, almost 2,600 mallards, 635 great blue herons and five golden eagles. The eagles were an accident, Wildlife Services said, as were two of the herons and 10 of the bears.

When the agency planned to increase wolf kills in Washington, a coalition of conservation agencies - including Cascadia Wildlands and Predator Defense, both based in Eugene - filed suit in March.

They alleged the agency was violating federal law by, among other things, not preparing a required Environmental Impact Statement.

This week, District Judge Robert Ryan agreed, ruling that "Wildlife Services acted arbitrarily and capriciously" in failing to do an EIS.

Ryan also criticized Wildlife Services for downplaying public concern and controversy surrounding the plan and failing to address ecological impacts. And he noted there is disagreement in the scientific community about whether killing more wolves has any impact on livestock deaths.

Environmentalists greeted the ruling with joy - "Wildlife Services has long asserted that it need not comply with our nation's federal environmental laws ... but this decision rejects those arguments," said attorney John Mellgren, of the Eugene-based Western Environmental Law Center, which represented the plaintiffs in the lawsuit.

But going forward it's not clear how much impact it will have on how the federal agency operates.

Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore., a longtime critic, said he was disappointed by the results of an audit of Wildlife Services he requested in 2012. That audit, which was done by the inspector general of the USDA, the agency's parent, was neither thorough nor independent, he said. "Ranching stakeholders wield a great deal of influence in Washington D.C. ... now it appears they are impacting the USDA IG's office." DeFazio said he is encouraged by this week's court decision, which "highlights the many flaws in the Wildlife Services' environmental analysis and actions."

The court decision, however, is only a start. What is needed is an independent, national audit of Wildlife Services, opening up the agency to public scrutiny that can determine whether it should survive and, if so, in what form.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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