

WILDLIFE INVESTIGATION

# Suggestions in changing Wildlife Services range from new practices to outright bans

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Like many ranchers, Bill Jensen drives a pickup, shoots a high-powered rifle and loves to talk about sheep, cattle and the outdoors.

But unlike many ranchers, he no longer relies on the federal government for predator control.

Nor does the Marin County rancher have a choice. Ten years ago Marin, known for

"We've pretty much learned how to control coyotes on our own," said Jensen, whose losses to coyotes have declined 60 percent to 70 percent – from about 50 lambs a year when a federal trapper worked there to 15 to 20 today. "Anything that can help you 24 hours a day, like electric fencing, is a good thing."

What's happening in Marin County shows that ranchers can co-exist with predators without lethal federal control. It is part of a broader and varied spirit of reform aimed at finding new, less destructive ways to live with predators and other wildlife.

The target of that effort – a little-known division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture called Wildlife Services – has long specialized in destroying animals considered to be a threat to agriculture, the public and the environment.

Since 2006, employees have trapped, shot and poisoned more than a half million coyotes and other predators, along with 300-plus other species, from non-native starlings and pigeons to red-tailed hawks, prairie dogs, beaver and other native birds and mammals. In the process, they have also accidentally killed more than 50,000 non-target animals, from domestic dogs to golden eagles to black bears.

"People want to see bears. They want to see wolves. They want to see mountain lions. It's part of the natural heritage of the United States," said Michael Mares, president of the American Society of Mammalogists. "We should be stewards of the system, not wiping out species and damaging ecosystems."

Ideas for reform include more nonlethal control, curtailing aerial gunning, a ban on traps, snares and cyanide poison and pouring more resources into controlling invasive species. Some critics are calling for an investigation of Wildlife Services' trapping practices and perhaps eliminating the agency altogether.

"As a fiscal conservative and a budget hawk, why is the taxpayer paying for this?" said Rep. John Campbell, a Republican from Irvine and one of the agency's leading critics.

"We're in a period in which everything in the budget is being looked at," Campbell said. "Here we have a program that is not very effective, has a number of unintended consequences and costs millions of dollars."

Many, of course, do not support change, including the American Farm Bureau Federation, which represents more than 6 million farmers and ranchers nationwide. "They provide a lot of valuable services," Richard Krause, senior director of congressional relations for the federation, said of Wildlife Services.

"They help control predators and pests that cause millions of dollars in damage to agricultural producers every year, from crops to livestock," Krause said. "We support the idea of what Wildlife Services does."

One week ago today, The Bee began a series of articles that touched off a firestorm of debate about Wildlife Services.

"There needs to be an investigation of this agency. It is literally out of control," said Brooks Fahy, executive director of Predator Defense, an Oregon environmental group, who is now urging Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore., and Campbell to conduct a congressional oversight hearing on Wildlife Services.

"It answers to nobody," Fahy said.

## Push for change

One matter is already under discussion: a bill introduced by Campbell and DeFazio in March that would ban one of Wildlife Services' most toxic tools: spring-loaded sodium-cyanide cartridges known as M-44s that fire a burst of poison into the mouth of whatever tugs on them, along with a less commonly used poison called Compound 1080 (sodium fluoroacetate).

Since 2006, federal M-44s have killed more than 81,000 predators on public and private land, agency records show. But 3,400 non-target animals have died, too, including bobcats, swift foxes and dogs.

"The public has no idea what danger they are in when they are out there with their families," said Rex Shaddox, former Wildlife Services trapper who has deployed M-44s to kill coyotes and recently traveled to Washington in support of a ban.

"Something's got to be done."

Agency officials disagree. "In 2009 the EPA found that Wildlife Services' use of M-44 does not pose significant risks to humans or the environment," said Wildlife Services spokeswoman Carol Bannerman. The review, she added, "found the (M-44) device has a significant benefit in reducing predation without making an impact on coyote, other target species, or non-target species."

The farm bureau's Krause said: "We certainly do not endorse taking non-targets. By the same token, we recognize that, until technology gets a lot better, that it will happen. I know we have supported efforts to try to keep any control as specific as possible to offending animals."

Today's push for reform is the latest in an effort stretching back decades. No voice has been more consistent than the 93-year-old American Society of Mammalogists, which has protested wholesale federal predator control and for many decades has called for a ban on poison.

"We believe that current science does not support much of Wildlife Services' lethal control of native mammals, that it is wasteful and often counterproductive," Mares, the society president, wrote in a letter to the agency in March.

"Perhaps the primary emphasis should be to control invasive, exotic species, a rapidly worsening threat to rare native species and ecosystems," Mares suggested in the letter.

Although Wildlife Services does some work to control nonnative species – such as wild pigs and nutria – Deputy Administrator William Clay would like to do more. "Invasive species have been recognized as a national problem for many years," he wrote in a letter back to Mares, "and was a focus of the symposium we sponsored in 2007 to inaugurate our new invasive species research building.

"Unfortunately, despite the best efforts of the National Invasive Species Council resources have not emerged," Clay added. "Thus we usually work on a small scale in response to specific complaints. We would welcome additional ideas for financial support."

The agency augments its budget with funds from farmers, ranchers and other "cooperators" – financial relationships that critics say should be re-examined, perhaps even ended, because they are often aimed at killing native wildlife.

"It's an inherent conflict of interest to have private organizations and individuals funding a federal agency," said Fahy. "They are buying influence. They are buying a federal agency."

Environmentalists and wildlife groups are calling for major overhauls, including more spending on nonlethal control and greater transparency in the reporting of non-target species killed. Early this summer, the Natural Resources Defense Council, one of the largest green groups in the county, is expected to release "Wild Things," a 30-minute documentary about the agency. ([See the trailer and other videos here.](#))

"In fairness, we see that there is a legitimate case to be made for having a federal agency help resolve conflicts with wildlife. But the problem is the current form of this agency is clearly antiquated – it's a relic of the past," said Stephanie Boyles Griffin, a wildlife scientist with the Humane Society of the United States.

"They are needlessly killing a lot of target and non-target animals and maiming and killing family pets in some situations," Boyles Griffin said. "And we think it's time for a new way forward."

## **Air and ground attacks**

Hunting predators from the air in planes and helicopters kills more than any other technique. That is a practice that many believe should be curtailed, perhaps banned, because of the cost and danger. Since 1979, 10 people have been killed and several others injured in agency aerial gunning crashes across the West, including California.

"Flying year-round is a waste of money, time and, most importantly, people's lives," said Gary Strader, a former agency trapper in Nevada. "It is very expensive and extremely dangerous."

Wildlife Services defends the practice. "Aerial operations are one of the most effective, selective and environmentally sound methods of lethal management," a 2011 environmental assessment in Nevada reported.

And it added: "In 2008, the Interagency Committee for Aviation Policy awarded Wildlife Services a Certificate of Recognition for meeting the requirements of (the committee's) Federal Aviation Gold Standard Program."

On the ground, two of the agency's top wildlife-killing tools – leg-hold traps and neck snares – are also drawing the attention of environmentalists, many of whom want them outlawed.

"It's a war zone out here," said Lynne Stone, director of the Boulder-White Clouds Council, a wolf advocacy group in Idaho. "They are strangling and mangling coyotes, wolves, foxes, raccoons and bobcats. It's so ugly I'm afraid to walk my dog."

Strader said a ban goes too far, but he believes agency employees should be required to check traps and snares more frequently to limit animal suffering.

"There are times when traps and snares go months without being checked," he said. "If a recreational trapper did that, he would have his license taken away. Wildlife Services is not being animal-friendly or anywhere near it."

The agency's accidental killing of wildlife – including federally protected bald and golden eagles – is another sore point.

"What they do in the field lacks complete public scrutiny," said Wendy Keefover, director of carnivore protection for WildEarth Guardians. The group filed a lawsuit last week asking that agency activities be halted until it prepares a new, more comprehensive environmental impact statement.

"Wildlife are being killed and not counted," said Keefover. "Federally protected species are being buried in the ground."

## **Public trust called vital**

Stone suggested a stronger fix. "It should be gotten rid of – unless they can start teaching people how to live with wildlife, instead of just killing it," she said.

Environmentalists have found an unlikely ally in their efforts to sow reform: Carter Niemeyer, a former Wildlife Services district supervisor who wrote about his career at the agency in a 2010 memoir called "Wolfer," which won the 2011 Independent Publisher Book Awards Gold Medal for regional nonfiction.

"Federal trappers like to think they're good at what they do, and most of the time they are – but only when it comes to killing," Niemeyer wrote in the book.

"When it comes to conserving – being careful not to leave a wolf in a trap too long, not letting it drown because the trap was set near water, learning how to mix immobilizing drugs properly, accidentally shooting the wrong ones because they can't tell a pup from an adult – that's where the agency is woefully, willfully sloppy."

Recently, Niemeyer traveled to Washington, D.C., to share his concerns with agency managers. Asked what he would do if he were in charge, Niemeyer replied with a long email calling for better training and education in wildlife management, ethics and the humane treatment of animals.

"I would phase in college-trained wildlife personnel," he wrote. "Many (trappers) have a basic high school education and only district supervisors like myself receive some specialized training while trappers were seldom considered."

He also called for less killing and more transparency.

"If the public trusts you, there will be a lot less question about what you are doing," Niemeyer said. "It's that simple."

He said employees in the West could learn from colleagues back East. "The eastern program is much more advanced," Niemeyer said. "They are dealing with disease surveillance, feral animals, including wild pigs and urban wildlife problems: rodents, deer, beaver, skunks, opossums, raccoons, etc., and give me the appearance that they are much more grounded in dealing with the everyday public in urban and farming communities.

"In contrast, I see the western program still hung up, primarily, with killing predators like foxes, coyotes, wolves, bears and mountain lions, not so much because these animals are problems but because they exist and are macho to kill and the 'western culture' encourages and demands Wildlife Services be funded and continue to focus on these species," Niemeyer said.

"I would downgrade predator control in the West to a corrective program and phase out the preventative program of thinning out coyote populations in the event that they might kill livestock in the future," Niemeyer added.

Some ranches are already taking such steps, including the 24,000- acre Lava Lake Land and Livestock sheep ranch in Idaho.

"Our company has a dual mission: to produce the world's best grass-fed lamb and achieve conservation at a landscape scale," said Mike Stevens, the ranch president. "For us, landscape scale implies having all the big animals roaming the landscape, and that includes predators."

The ranch leases more than 800,000 acres of grazing land from the government in a rugged and scenic swath of high rolling hills and mountain terrain occupied by coyotes, bears, mountain lions and wolves.

Living with predators isn't always easy – wolves have occasionally killed sheep – but instead of retaliating, Stevens and California-based ranch owners Brian and Kathleen Bean have deployed a wide range of nonlethal strategies including portable corrals, electric fencing rigged with distractive flagging, all-night vigils by herders armed with rubber bullets and Great Pyrenees guard dogs.

"We found that that we were able to radically reduce our losses down to one or two scattered animals," Stevens said. "It can happen. It takes a lot of work and management time. It takes a commitment at all levels of the company."

## **Agency touts pioneer role**

Clay, the agency deputy administrator, said critics often overlook Wildlife Services' role as a pioneer in developing such nonlethal wildlife control techniques. One of its employees, since retired, helped out at the Lava Lake ranch, along with Niemeyer and Suzanne Stone, northern Rockies representative for Defenders of Wildlife, a national environmental group.

"Most of the effective nonlethal methods out there have been developed by Wildlife Services or tested by Wildlife Services," Clay said. He cited some examples: bird



repellents such as anthraquinone and methyl anthranilate, birth control for white-tailed deer, and electronic siren and strobe devices to scare off predators.

"We're looking right now at these Eurasian guard dogs, these bigger dogs that can be more effective against wolf predation," Clay said.

But Defenders of Wildlife's Stone said the agency's animal-friendly research and practices are rarely deployed in the field.

"Their researchers are some of the top nonlethal specialists in the world," Stone said. "They are developing and testing a lot of tools. But those tools are more often than not ridiculed by their field agents. They promote using lethal control almost always."

The Wildlife Services agent who helped out at Lava Lake "was ridiculed, undermined and shunned by his own agency," she added. "Not only are they undermining the use of this stuff in the field, they are actually undermining states that are trying to use these things."

Clay said: "I do think we can improve in that area. Three or four years ago we hired a person whose job is to be a resource for nonlethal methods and transfer (them) into the field, to farmers and ranchers."

## **A different approach**

Another place where nonlethal methods are working is rural Marin County, where Wildlife Services' lethal program was halted in 2002 after environmentalists objected to agency practices.

"We know predators play a critical role in maintaining ecosystem health," said Camilla Fox, executive director of a local nonprofit, Project Coyote, who helped persuade county supervisors not to renew the Wildlife Services contract.

Bill Jensen, whose great-great grandfather homesteaded his ranch in the wind-swept, rolling coastal hills not far from Point Reyes in the 19th century, initially was skeptical.

"I'm the person that loses the money when predators kill my livestock," he said.

"I told Camilla (Fox), how did you pick such a heathen of an animal to make your poster child? This is not the least bit endangered and causes more grief and trouble and is the most adaptable creature on the face of planet Earth. Why is this what you want to save?"

Fox – whose father is a well-known animal advocate and a former vice president of the Humane Society of the United States – had her reasons.

"Remove the coyote and you'll have an increase of foxes, skunks and other meso-predators," she said. "We know that when those predators increase, the songbird population and diversity often decreases. This whole system of federal predator control is deeply out of whack with what science is telling us."

Despite their differences, Fox and Jensen worked with the Marin County Department of Agriculture to craft a nonlethal program that reimburses ranchers for fencing, guard dogs and other expenses. They are no longer adversaries.

The program – which has been called the only one of its kind in the nation – also reimburses ranchers for losses to coyotes and does not forbid the killing of coyotes that threaten sheep.

"It works fine for me," said Jensen, not long after he shot a coyote one day last fall with a .22-250 varmint rifle. "He was about 100 yards over the fence from my sheep. If you can put out a small fire before it becomes a blaze, you're better off. And that's not advocating trying to slaughter coyotes everywhere, but when there is one right there that is an immediate threat to your livestock, you almost got to give it a shot."

"Tomorrow will be a nonlethal day," he joked.

Jensen said the nonlethal county program has made him a better – and busier – rancher. "Along with being a sheep rancher and a maintenance person and a fencer and an electrician, now you have to be an animal damage-control person," he said. "I'm definitely having some luck with it."

"Some people were trying to rely on what the trapper was able to do to keep them in business – and that was not going to work," Jensen said. "They were only so effective. They can't be here all the time."

"We're the only people that are going to save ourselves in this thing."

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