

## Fire From the Sky

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In cattle country, wildlife falls under the federal gun

By TIM VANDERPOOL

In January, sleepy San Rafael Valley awoke to gunfire. And when the carnage was complete, some 200 dead coyotes were strewn like question marks across the land.

Conducted by airborne marksmen, the hunt was orchestrated by a little-known federal agency called Wildlife Services, at the request of Southern Arizona's cattle ranchers. But as the dust clears, this "predator control" operation has reignited debate over its scientific merits, and the propriety of tapping taxpayer dollars to kill wildlife--much of it on public lands--for the benefit of private interests.

Wildlife Services contends that ranchers paid for the operations over their range, which includes leased allotments in the Coronado National Forest. At \$200 per hour, that tab totaled about \$8,000. But months of agency planning, and the shuttling of aircraft and hunt teams to the site, was funded by the public.

Unfortunately, the agency won't disclose just who taxpayers were assisting with this three-week flurry of aerial shooting, or the total cost they will bear. Adding to the secrecy, there were no public notices of the pending operation, even as it unfolded in forest areas used by hikers



*Saving cattle, one dead coyote at a time.*

*Tim Vanderpool*

and campers.

Taken together, it's little surprise that such hunts have a battalion of critics. Among them is Daniel Patterson, an ecologist with the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity. "First it was wolves, then jaguars and now coyotes," he says. "But aren't ranchers supposed to take care of their own animals? Why is there an agency within the federal government that kills animals? It's not appropriate at all."

Patterson says those requesting the aerial gunning are so-called "hobby ranchers," successful business people who dabble in cattle as a novelty. "They're too busy playing the stock market to manage their herds."

Attempts to contact area ranchers weren't

successful. And calls to Bill Brake, president of the Arizona Cattle Growers Association, were not returned.

But a Wildlife Services spokeswoman defends the practice as necessary and widely accepted. "You would be surprised at the public support we have across the board," says Teresa Howes, from her office in Fort Collins, Colo. "People don't have to like what we do. And a lot of people don't. But they understand that sometimes we have to do the hard work to solve the problem at a specific site."

Dating back to 1915 under various titles--a recent predecessor was Animal Damage Control--the euphemistically named Wildlife Services implements its "integrated pest management" program primarily in Western states. According

to statistics compiled by the Montana-based Predator Conservation Alliance, each year, this program is responsible for trapping, poisoning or shooting about 87,000 coyotes, 6,000 foxes, 2,500 bobcats and hundreds of black bears, mountain lions and badgers.

As in this case, exterminations often come at the behest of livestock growers and hunters. But conservationists blame such policies for decimating large predator populations--including those now in costly recovery, such as the Mexican gray wolf. The hunts are likewise faulted for upsetting delicate ecological systems, which can lead to overabundant game animals. These operations also may prove futile: After coyotes are killed, for example, their territory is often quickly filled by others. Instead, critics promote effective and humane livestock protection through improved fencing, and guard animals ranging from donkeys and llamas to dogs.

Nor is the program even cost-effective, according to David Gaillard of the Predator Conservation Alliance. "Each year," he says, "Wildlife Services spends more than \$10 million in federal funds to kill nearly 100,000 predators."

And those funds are on the rise. According to the Wildlife Services Web site, its Arizona budget more than doubled between 2000 and 2004, to an impressive \$2 million.

That is money misspent, says Gaillard. "If you look at 100 years of using government resources and agents to kill predators--mostly coyotes--it's pretty obvious that it's not working. We've got more coyotes in more places than we've ever had before."

At the same time, the agency is misleading when it come to costs for specific hunts. In an e-mail to the Tucson Weekly, spokeswoman Howes writes that "ranchers pay 100 percent of the aerial crew time when they are over the individuals' property, leases or allotments."

But Wildlife Services is less eager to point out that taxpayers picked up the undisclosed cost for agency planning and related air time; a request for those numbers was denied.

Plans for these hunts are also forged quietly, with little or no public scrutiny. In this case, agencies such as the Arizona Game and Fish Department were only notified "as a courtesy," says Pat Barber, predator and furbearer biologist for the AGF's game branch. Although Barber's department occasionally schedules coyote eradication to protect vulnerable wildlife such as antelope fawns, this operation "was requested by the ranchers," he says. "It was a contract deal with them, as I understand it. We're not really part of that process at all."

Nor are Forest Service officials required to notify the public of pending hunts on its land. According to an interagency "memorandum of understanding," the Forest Service is to "identify areas heavily used by the public during the planning stages of a hunt," says Coronado spokeswoman Gail Aschenbrenner. But the interagency agreement "is silent on who has responsibility for public notification."

However, she adds, "should a similar project arise from Wildlife Services, we would be glad to work cooperatively with them to identify a public notification process commensurate with the management action."

That would be nice, says Matt Skroch, head of the Tucson environmental group Sky Island Alliance. "It would seem appropriate to notify the public if there's going be planes flying overhead shooting wildlife."

Public notice or not, Howes defends Wildlife Services' methods for protecting citizens and livestock from dangerous predators. "Have you ever seen a calf that's been eaten by a coyote?" she asks. "My point is that it's emotional on both sides."

That's an interesting argument. And true, it's probably quite emotional for livestock animals to be killed even before they're shipped off to the slaughterhouse. Thank heavens taxpayers are there to save the day.