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## **Bush Administration to Ramp Up Aerial Gunning**

From The Center for Biological Diversity:

The Bush administration proposed last week to relax restrictions on aerial gunning and poisoning of “problem” wildlife such as coyotes, foxes, mountain lions and wolves in designated Wilderness areas and Research Natural Areas on Forest Service land. Wilderness and Research Natural Areas are the two most protective land management classifications the Forest Service has, and both were formerly off-limits to predator control programs except in limited circumstances.

Wilderness areas are designated by Congress and are set aside as places where natural processes are free to take their course. The 1964 Wilderness Act describes Wilderness as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” [16 U.S.C. 1131©]. Wilderness areas are a popular destination for hikers and horseback riders who wish to see wildlife and remote natural areas. Currently, predator control actions are only permitted in designated Wilderness areas when they are needed to protect an endangered species or human life, and all control is done on a case-by-case basis with strict provisions designed to ensure that wilderness values are not impaired.

Research Natural Areas are small areas that, according to Forest Service policy, “may be used only for research, study, observation, monitoring, and those educational activities that maintain unmodified conditions” (Forest Service Manual 4063.03).

The changes the Forest Service announced last week would reverse the long-standing policies that protect wildlife in Wilderness areas and Research Natural Areas. The new rule would permit motorized and aerial trapping and killing of wildlife in both land designations. It would also make predator control an “objective” in Wilderness management, rather than reserving such activities for times when they are necessary to protect human life or endangered species. Worse, the new rule permits predator control when it is advised by a “collaborative process” that is undefined in the rule, but which presumably would entail meetings by livestock interests that are typically hostile both to Wilderness and to wolves, coyotes, cougars, bobcats, bears, lynx, foxes and other wildlife.

“This rule is a dramatic and devastating blow to our nation’s wildlife and wilderness areas,” said Erik Ryberg, Staff Attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity. Piece by piece the Bush administration is stripping away every protection, every refuge, our wildlife formerly enjoyed. Few Americans consider a wilderness experience to include people in helicopters and on motorcycles tracking coyotes through the forest and killing them, but that is exactly what this rule authorizes.”

Along with relaxing the conditions under which predator control may occur in Wilderness areas and Research Natural Areas, the rule would also permit the use of poisons such as M-44 cyanide guns, which are currently banned in Wilderness areas. Domestic dogs are often killed by M-44’s, and the poisons are also a significant danger to children.

Furthermore, the proposal would exempt the Forest Service from conducting an environmental assessment under the National Environmental Policy Act of the impacts of predator control actions. Thus, members of the public would be less likely to know in advance which Wilderness areas they might spot helicopter gunmen shooting coyotes or witness the dying convulsions of their family dog.