

Wildlife Coalition Sends Letter to Vilsack

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A coalition of 115 conservation, animal protection, ranching and religious organizations on Friday submitted a letter to Tom Vilsack, the Agriculture Secretary nominee, urging him to end the federal government's systematic killing of wildlife, including wolves, coyotes, bears, cougars and prairie dogs.

Members of the coalition--comprised of Big Wildlife, Center for Biological Diversity, Creation Care Study Program, Christians for Environmental Stewardship, Humane Society of the United States, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, Sierra Club, and Ranchers for Rural Responsibility, among many others--said that each year the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services kills millions of wild animals, primarily on behalf of agribusiness.

Coalition members said halting the agency's "lethal control" programs should be one of the nominee's first steps once he is confirmed as Secretary of Agriculture. The group claims the USDA Wildlife Services employs a variety of cruel and often haphazard methods to kill wildlife, including shooting from airplanes and helicopters, poisoning, gassing dens, bludgeoning after capture and strangling in wire snares.

"Wildlife Services has much blood on its hands. The agency is committing crimes against animals that make Michael Vick's Bad Newz Kennels look like doggy day care," said Brian Vincent, communications director for the wildlife protection group Big Wildlife.

The group said in 2007 alone, Wildlife Services killed 2.4 million animals, including 121,565 carnivores. The agency reported it spent more than \$100 million in 2007 to kill wildlife, most of which was funded by taxpayers. Among those animals killed in 2007: 90,262 coyotes, 2,277 gray foxes, 2,412 red foxes, 2,090 bobcats, 1,133 cats, 552 dogs, 577 badgers, and 340 gray wolves.

"Wildlife Services' is a perfectly Orwellian name for an agency that serves wildlife with cyanide baits, lead bullets, and steel leghold traps," said Michael Robinson, conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity in Silver City, N.M. Robinson is the author of a detailed history of the agency titled *Predatory Bureaucracy: The Extermination of Wolves and the Transformation of the West* (University Press of Colorado, 2005).

Robinson's book recounts that Wildlife Services was founded in 1885 under a different name, and began its wildlife extermination program in 1915. In 1928, responding to criticism from wildlife biologists, the agency pledged not to exterminate any species and stopped using the word "exterminate," substituting it with "control." However, in 1945 the agency killed the last gray wolf in the western United States, in southern Colorado. In the 1960s, after Wildlife Services officials told Congress the agency would not exterminate wildlife, it wiped out red wolves from the southeastern United States, California condors in their namesake state, and blackfooted ferrets on the Great Plains, as well as the Mexican gray wolf in the Republic of Mexico, having gained permission from Mexican authorities. The last survivors of each of these species were captured, bred in captivity and subsequently reintroduced to save the species from extinction.

Members of the conservation and animal-protection group coalition that sent the letter to Vilsack said that Wildlife Services' killing program ignores the importance of carnivores. As "keystone species," carnivores play a pivotal role in sustaining ecological integrity and preserving species' diversity. For example, large carnivores regulate deer and elk numbers, as well as smaller mammal populations. Wolf reintroduction in Yellowstone National Park has benefited bears, foxes, beavers and songbirds, among other animals.

Many non-lethal solutions are less expensive and more effective at reducing conflicts than killing, coalition members said. Ranchers who use guard dogs, llamas, burros, or who mix cattle and sheep report fewer or no predation problems. Nighttime penning, penning during lambing and calving season, and removing livestock carcasses from pastures also reduce conflicts. In addition, strobes and sirens are effective for preventing predation.

Members of the groups said that monies spent on killing wildlife would be better used to educate and aid ranchers, farmers, and others to upgrade their fencing or assist them with utilizing non-lethal techniques. Eliminating subsidized domestic-animal grazing on public lands would sharply reduce encounters with carnivores, they said.