



## New coalition asks for kinder treatment of wildlife

**By Barbara Kessler  
Green Right Now**

A new coalition of animal rights, conservation and faith groups is asking for a philosophical change in how the federal government treats the nation's diminishing wildlife, particularly of top predators, whose presence helps insure healthy wild ecosystems.

The coalition sent a letter signed by 115 of its member groups to Agriculture Secretary nominee Tom Vilsack earlier this month asking him to end the federal government's systematic killings of wildlife, such as wolves, coyotes, bears, cougars and prairie dogs.

The group contends that the killings are excessive and often cruel and that Wildlife Services, a department of the USDA that exterminated 2.4 million animals in 2007 should be reevaluated.

"The agency employs a host of cruel - and expensive and unnecessary - methods to kill coyotes, bears, cougars, wolves, and other wildlife. Animals are shot, poisoned, gassed in their dens, trapped, snared, clubbed, pursued by hounds, targeted from helicopters and planes, or lured to



bait stations where they are shot. Other animals, even family dogs and cats, are unintentionally injured or killed by agency actions," the petition stated.

Many people think of fish and game departments as the primary agents in the field taking action in wildlife incidents. But the USDA's Wildlife Services is charged with protecting agricultural interests and human safety, and has long exercised wide authority to "control" animal populations around urban areas, businesses, farms and other agriculture operations and airports.

The vast majority of those animals, some 86 percent, that clash with human concerns or present safety issues (such as when birds congregate at airports or eat seeds planted for crops or intended for livestock) are dispersed, not killed, said Carol A. Bannerman, a spokeswoman for the agency.

"There is a heavy emphasis on dispersal, rather than removal," she said.

The 2.4 million kill tally is accurate, she said, but it includes several scenarios in which lethal actions are justified. The agency,

for instance, is killing the invading Gambian rat in Florida, because they are a non-native species that threatens tropical fruit operations. Similarly, millions of non-native European Starlings, which can cause intrusions at airports and also contaminate seeds intended for dairy cows, are killed.

The starlings accounted for the most killings last year, with 1.2 million being exterminated. Predators accounted for 120,000 of the total 2.4 million exterminations.

As for the shootings, poisoning and trapping of coyotes and other native predators, Bannerman says that livestock losses of 500,000 (mostly sheep and cattle) tell the story of why agents sometimes take lethal measures.

Vilsack, a former Iowa governor who is expected to be confirmed with little debate, has not responded to the coalition's petition.

The coalition laments all intentional animal killings, but it particularly wants a reevaluation of animals like prairie dogs and coyotes, viewed in some corners as pests, and top predators, whose reputations can fuel a knee-jerk human response.

There are times when a wild animal needs to be killed for safety reasons, but "I think it's quite rare," said Big Wildlife co-founder Brian Vincent, an organizer of the coalition. "And even in cases where wild animals might do some damage, we shouldn't pull the trigger immediately," he said.

He cited the government's practice of shooting wolves and coyotes from the air, gassing or poisoning of coyote pups in their dens and tracking and trapping mountain lions simply to thin their populations. These are examples of the government needlessly or cruelly pursuing wildlife, he

said, and if the public knew more about these killings, they'd be "outraged."

In a news release Wednesday, coinciding with Vilsack's confirmation hearings, the coalition pointed out some examples of what it considers outrageous killings, citing Wildlife Services' killings of all 27 wolves of a pack near Kalispell, Mont., and its plan to help the state of Oregon kill nearly 2,000 cougars.

"Wildlife Services kills carnivores and smaller animals such as prairie dogs to appease the livestock industry and kills a myriad of other animals such as blackbirds on behalf of other agribusiness enterprises..." the news release stated.

Big Wildlife, which was formed to oppose the systematic killing of top predators, and the Center for Biological Diversity, are the key organizers of the coalition. It includes a breadth of groups, from Sierra Club and the Wild West Institute, to Prairie Dog Pals, Jewish Vegetarians of North America and Christians for Environmental Stewardship, that believe the government pursues wildlife too aggressively.



Wildlife Services has too long taken a "shoot first and ask questions later" approach to animal control, Vincent said.

The coalition is targeting the Wildlife Services because its agents commission or commit by far the most animal killings by federal authorities in the course of its mission to protect human activities. (The federal Fish and Wildlife Services and state natural resource and fish and game department agents also can take control actions.)

The agency's adversarial approach to wildlife and treatment of top predators as "nuisance animals" is a legacy of its early days when it was called Animal Damage Control and hunted wildlife with little constraint, said Michael Robinson, a conservation advocate with The Center for Biodiversity who has written a history of Wildlife Services.

Wildlife Services has always operated in a "culture of secrecy," he said. "The reason more people don't know about this (the extent of modern-day killings) is there's been a concerted effort to keep damaging photos from the public and damaging reports from the public."

"This is an agency that's been very resistance to reform in the past but we did think it was important to reach out to this new administration and request that the killing be stopped," Robinson said. "We have a responsibility to treat wildlife well, not to slaughter animals without a darn good reason, and there isn't one in this case."

In his book, Predatory Bureaucracy, Robinson documents past investigations of Wildlife Services and its history, which includes the successful campaign to exterminate

the Rocky Mountain gray wolves in the early 20th Century, leading to their virtual extinction in the lower 48 states.

The wolves were reintroduced in 1995, but a culture of hostility toward them persisted, Robinson said. While under federal protection of the Endangered Species Act (from 1995-2007), 931 wolves have been killed in the Rockies for threatening or killing livestock or in response to complaints about them, Robinson said.

So many killings raises questions about whether enough is being done to avoid deadly encounters, says Vincent. He believes too little money and effort is directed at measures that can avert killings, such as asking ranchers to pen their livestock at night, use herders or guard dogs and build better fences.

He listed other more humane solutions, such as:

- Enacting local laws that require residents and campers to keep food inside to avoid luring a bear or other animal too close to humans.
- Relocations of wildlife (which the agency does do) when appropriate.
- A reassessment of when killing is “necessary” in cases such as the hunts to winnow cougar populations or push back coyotes from suburban areas.
- Changing practices to avoid conflict, such as moving cows off of federal lands — farther away from predators — when they’re calving and vulnerable.

Ms. Bannerman says Wildlife Services does pursue alternate measures, citing the agency’s installation of flags and alarms to scare wolves and coyotes away

from ranches and programs to reduce Canada geese populations around airports by using corn oil to reduce the hatching prospects of eggs. The agency also puts out a fact sheet with several tips to help urban residents and landowners avoid coyotes.

“More than 70 percent of our research funds go into research into other methods, not lethal uses,” she said, adding that the agency will soon be adding staff and programs to develop even more non-lethal control tactics.

The issue affects every state in the union, but looms especially large in the Western states where Big Wildlife and other groups have concluded that top predators need a dedicated advocate voice.

Many large conservation groups work hard to protect certain endangered species or specific wilderness areas, but few have promoted the value of carnivores such as coyotes, viewed as a nuisances despite playing a legitimate role in their natural environs, Vincent said.

When state and federal agents take an aggressive approach to killing the carnivores at the top of the food chain, they upset the natural order of habitats and harm the nation’s remaining wilderness areas in ways that often only become apparent later on, he said.

The cascade of consequences can have unintended effects, hurting small animals and plant life. Recent research has shown, for instance, that the decline of coyotes in the Southwest has contributed to the overpopulation of mice, and that may have played a role in the rise of the deadly hanta virus in the four corners region, said Big Wildlife’s



co-founder Spencer Lennard.

In Yellowstone, when the wolves disappeared, the balance of nature shifted against aspen trees. Saplings that had previously thrived along stream beds were killed by the abundant elk. Next, there was a loss of certain songbirds, and beavers who needed the aspens. When the wolves were reintroduced, a new generation of aspens and cottonwoods brought back the biodiversity.

The coalition’s arguments that top predators keep ecosystems robust has been demonstrated by scientists in many cases.

The contention that the public would be outraged if it knew more about the Wildlife Service’s is no doubt true also - but not for everyone.

The public has risen up on both sides of wildlife killings. In clashes in the Northern Rockies over how much the restored gray wolf population needs to be “culled” if at all, ranchers and residents have

argued for and against aggressive hunting or control measures — vehemently.

In Oklahoma, a 2007 story in The Oklahoman's web edition NewsOK about Wildlife Services' killings of coyote cubs — by beheading them with shovels — brought mixed reaction from readers. Some proclaimed that well, a dead coyote is a dead coyote and it doesn't matter how it got that way.

Some were repulsed by the method, but defended the killings of coyotes to protect livestock, kids and pets. Others decried the barbarity of the entire episode.

In Oregon, the public has expressed concerns about, but has been unable to stop the routine killings of bears that the killing of about 400 bears every year to protect timber plantations; a "control" measure in which bears that threaten trees are trapped and then shot, along with their cubs, which will wait near their trapped mother.

"The reason (for the trapping) is so ridiculous, it's because they peel the bark off the trees on industrial tree farms," Vincent said. "The corporate timber companies claim it causes economic loss to them, but really how much damage could it do? We're talking about vast acreages and a handful of trees, and a whole bear family is killed."

A local agent quoted in The Olympian defended the practice, saying "we target peeling bears" not any others and that the aggregate tree damage from "peeling bears" comes to more than \$11 million a year.

Vincent knows that the bid for more humane treatment of wildlife is not a slam dunk. Wild animals do kill livestock and family pets. A response is justified. Opinions differ about that response.



But he remains steadfast in his belief that compromise solutions can be found and killings can be reduced.

"The public and its trust resources would be far better served by shifting Wildlife Services' resources away from expansive killing of animals to providing public education about wildlife and employing non-lethal, humane measures to prevent conflicts. Such reforms would provide critical safeguards for communities and our nation's wild heritage."

(Photos credits: Coyote; Prairie Dog (by Claire Dolbert); Bear (by Mike Bender); Rocky Mountain gray wolf, US Fish & Wildlife Services.)

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