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Rogue Agency's Agent Investigated in Wolf Killing



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Something's not right in New Mexico. A federal agent with the notorious Wildlife Services agency is under investigation for killing a Mexican gray wolf. Adding to the misery, the government has been keeping this incident from the public.

It's no surprise that Wildlife Services, part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is involved. This highly secretive agency has come under heavy fire over the past year because of the tens of thousands of animals it senselessly kills each year, often in the name of protecting livestock. Its methods are a lethal mix of medieval brutality and high-tech efficiency that include aerial gunning, trapping, deadly gases and poisons.

The agency was the focus of a recent blistering series in the Sacramento Bee that revealed the torturing of coyotes, the death of family pets and golden eagles -- all done beneath the public's radar. Members of Congress called for an investigation.

Help apparently didn't come quick enough for the wolf in New Mexico.

The Southwest's endangered Mexican gray wolves -- with just three breeding pairs left in the wild -- are hanging on by a thread in New Mexico and Arizona. The last thing they need

is one of their own gunned down by an employee of the government that's supposed to be nursing this wild population back to health.

Although the killing happened months ago, the public didn't hear about it until it was reported in the Albuquerque Journal on Thursday afternoon. Government agencies, not surprisingly, have closed ranks and are refusing to talk about what happened.

Here's what we're piecing together: In January, a Wildlife Services employee apparently shot and killed a wolf, possibly a pup, while investigating the death of some livestock. The shooting evidently happened very close to the home range of the San Manteo wolf pack, which just added four pups to its family last year.

What's more troubling about the latest incident in New Mexico is that the very agency that's tasked with saving America's wolves, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, apparently knew about the wolf killing but is refusing to say anything about it.

I can't say it's all that shocking. The Fish and Wildlife Service has long taken a lackluster approach to wolf recovery in New Mexico and Arizona.

Fifteen years after Mexican wolves were first reintroduced to the Southwest, there are only 75 wolves in the wild. Wildlife officials pre-

dicted in 1998 there would be more than 100 in the wild by 2006. The Fish and Wildlife Service hadn't released a single wolf into the wild from its captive-breeding facilities in four years before one was finally let out earlier this year -- only to be recaptured by government agents three weeks later.

Scientists believe the small Mexican wolf population is suffering from genetic inbreeding, with reduced litter size and pup survivorship.

But the apparent shooting of the wolf in New Mexico in January was more than bureaucratic indifference. It was an act of violence against an animal protected under the Endangered Species Act.

The government has correctly launched an investigation into what happened and we'll be keen to see the results.

But one thing has already been made clear: By not coming out and talking about this incident publicly, these government agencies have placed a veil of secrecy over the behavior of one of its own and the management of one of this nation's flagship endangered species.

For anyone who cares about America's wildlife, or accountability in their government, that should be unacceptable.