

## Was scientist's dog poisoned by pot growers to silence him?



Nyxo died in February in Humboldt County after eating red meat laced with brodifacoum, a rat poison. The dog's owner, ecologist Mourad Gabriel, has been studying the poison and its effects on Pacific fishers and northern spotted owls. Photo: Associated Press

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Animal rights and environmental groups called Thursday for the state attorney general's office to launch an investigation into the mysterious killing of a scientist's dog in Humboldt County with a rat poison the scientist had studied and deemed dangerous to wildlife.

Nyxo, a 10-year-old Labrador mix, died in February after eating red meat in the backyard of his family's Blue Lake home. Investigators determined the meat had been laced with brodifacoum, a rat poison that Nyxo's owner, ecologist Mourad Gabriel, had studied in depth and declared detrimental to such wildlife as Pacific fishers and northern spotted owls, according to the Center for Biological Diversity.

Since Nyxo's death, Humboldt County sheriff's deputies have been looking into the possibility that Nyxo was targeted because of his owner's research, but six months later, no suspect has been identified.

For this reason, the Center for Biological Diversity delivered letters and signatures from more than 55,000 people on Thursday calling for a deeper investigation into Nyxo's death.

"It's a tragic story all around," said Jonathan Evans, the Center for Biological Diversity's toxics and endangered species campaign director. "You have this researcher who is out there doing some very strong and credible science and people are unfortunately trying to intimidate his research by targeting his family and pets."

He continued: "What's clear right now is that there hasn't been a conviction. We really need the expertise and scrutiny at a statewide level to go after this problem of targeting scientists and their independent research."

The attorney general's office usually respects jurisdictional claims to open investigations. But adding to this case's complications, Evans said many of those most affected by Gabriel's research into brodifacoum are illegal marijuana growers who pollute public lands with their illegal farms - an issue that does fall under the attorney general's jurisdiction.

"It speaks to a much larger problem, not just the individual incident, but this larger problem of illegal marijuana growing on our public land," Evans said. "(Gabriel) has to have members of law enforcement with him when he goes out to a lot of these sites because the threat to scientists is just so significant."

Nick Pacilio, a spokesman for the attorney general, said the state Department of Justice takes illegal marijuana grows on public lands very seriously - just last year, investigators took down a \$2 million operation in the state-owned Stone Lakes Preserve.

The office received notice of the letters asking for an investigation into Nyxo's death, Pacilio said, but he would not comment further.

Meanwhile, the Humboldt County Sheriff's Office is still investigating the case, said department spokesman Lt. Steve Knight. He said no other dogs were reported sick or similarly poisoned since Nyxo's death, and there was no evidence suggesting Nyxo had eaten the poisoned meat anywhere but in his backyard.

Gabriel told investigators that he only fed Nyxo dry food. Investigators also looked at the possibility that Gabriel had been targeted for an issue that wasn't his work, but "we have nothing indicating that there was other issues at the point," Knight said.

"We're all appalled that this happened, and we discussed it with some of our federal partners," Knight said. "If we can show it was related to his work, there's a possibility of all types of charges. But we need a suspect and at this point, no suspect has been identified."

The Center for Biological Diversity and Animal Legal Defense Fund are offering a \$20,000 reward for information leading to an arrest and conviction in Nyxo's death.

Knight said he hopes any attention to the case will bring in more tips. He asked for anyone with information to call the Humboldt County Sheriff's Office at (707) 445-7251 or the Sheriff's Office tip line at (707) 268-2539.