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Stop the Slaughter: Time to Rein in Wildlife Services' Reign of Terror

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Newborn fox and coyote pups are pulled from their dens and shot.

Thousands of animals gasp their final breaths in neck snares that sometimes ensnare legs or entire torsos leading to lengthy struggles before death.

Others, caught in traps that go unchecked for weeks at a time, die slow, excruciating deaths from starvation, thirst or heat.

Still others asphyxiate from poisonous fumigants placed in their dens -- sometimes after hours of painful convulsions.

This unregulated and highly unnecessary annual slaughter of bears, foxes, otters, eagles, songbirds and dozens of other species is the ongoing legacy of the highly secretive Wildlife Services, which just since 1996 has shot, snared and poisoned more than 22 million native animals.

The number is likely much higher. Because of a quirk in how the agency was set up by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, its activities are not guided by the kind of legally binding regulations that typically structure other federal agencies and require transparency.

As a result, Wildlife Services operates without the guidance of a broad public mission and allows virtually no public scrutiny. Instead, the agency works almost entirely as a covert livestock industry-guided wildlife extermination service. And that must change.

To that end, a legal petition I co-authored was filed this month asking the U.S. Department of Agriculture to put binding rules in place to regulate and make public the agencies' activities (see Washington Post coverage of the petition). And the USDA Office of Inspector General just announced it will complete an audit of the agency in Fiscal Year 2014.

With about 1.5 million wild animals needlessly dying every year, the need for reform is urgent. Despite repeated calls over the last century from investigative panels, scientists and legislators for greater transparency and use of science-based models to guide the agency's work, little has changed.

The few figures released by Wildlife Services offer a chilling portrait of a cold-blooded killing operation. In Fiscal Year 2012 alone the agency killed more than 1.6 million native animals, including 503 gray wolves, 76,000 coyotes, 567 black bears, two grizzlies, nearly 25,000 beaver, 533 river otters, 78 osprey, 396 mountain lions, and thousands of hawks and foxes.

Since 1996 the agency has killed 13 endangered species, including Hawaiian stilts, Mexican gray wolves and island foxes. Other species commonly killed include prairie dogs, bobcats, blackbirds, egrets and killdeer.

For decades there's been no shortage of evidence documenting problems with the rogue agency's indiscriminate killing tactics that lead to the deaths of thousands of non-target animals every year.

Back in 1964, the Advisory Board on Wildlife and Game Management reported that Wildlife Services had devolved into a special interest-serving bureaucracy with "scant relationship to real need and less still to scientific management." A report reaching similar conclusions was released in the 1970s

But the unchecked killing continues.

Last year in an investigative report titled "The Killing Agency," Sacramento Bee reporter Tom Knudson detailed that Wildlife Services had employed often inhumane tactics to kill millions of animals just since 2000, including the accidental killing of more than 50,000 animals.

A study published this year in the journal Conservation Letters makes many of the same points as previous investigations, saying the agency's brutal and careless methods of predator control not only fail over the long haul to effectively reduce predation on livestock, but destroy habitat and reduce biodiversity.

These investigations have amplified calls for reform. Still, there is little realistic chance of motivating change in Wildlife Services until some of the same common-sense rules that govern other federal agencies are put in place to guide how it operates.

Not everything that Wildlife Service does is bad. The agency, for example, controls populations of invasive species that threaten the survival of endangered species. But the bulk of its activities continue to involve the indiscriminate killing of millions of native animals, negatively impacting ecosystems across the country with little scientific support that the killing even has the intended benefits for the agricultural interests on whose behalf it is carried out.

The transformation of Wildlife Services is long overdue. Much about the world in which it operates has changed since its mission was established more than a century ago.

Not only has there been a dramatic shift in the public's attitudes toward humane treatment of other species, but there's been wide acceptance of the importance of protecting the biological diversity that sustains all life on Earth.

Yet, at the behest of the livestock industry, which happily funds a significant portion of the agency's budget, Wildlife Services has continued to ignore the latest science, public opinion and basic rules of ethical treatment of animals while following outdated, deeply flawed policies designed to eradicate wildlife threats to livestock grazing and agriculture.

The agency's unregulated killing gets worse with each passing year. After more than 100 years of ruthless, indiscriminate killing, the carnage must stop.

The Department of Agriculture must finally rein in this indefensible reign of terror.