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Agriculture's Misnamed Agency

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD

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There is a unit within the Agriculture Department's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service called Wildlife Services. Its official mission, according to its Web site, is "to resolve wildlife conflicts to allow people and wildlife to coexist." This has meant, since 2000, some two million dead animals. The list includes coyotes, beavers, mountain lions, black bears and innumerable birds. The agency's real mission? To make life safer for livestock and game species.

There will obviously be times when livestock and predators come into conflict, when coyotes kill lambs and black bears become too accustomed to humans and cause genuine harm. But Wildlife Services' lethal damage is broad and secretive, according to a series in The Sacramento Bee last year. The techniques are old-fashioned — steel traps and cyanide cartridges — and the result, according to a new study in the journal *Conservation Letters*, is a program that is wasteful, destructive to the balance of ecosystems and, ultimately, ineffective.

Under one name or another — for years it was part of the Interior Department — the

agency has been doing its work as quietly as possible, though not without protest from Congress, scientists and members of the public who got wind of what was going on. Two House members — John Campbell, a California Republican; and Peter DeFazio, an Oregon Democrat — have pressed for Congressional hearings and have asked the Agriculture Department's inspector general to investigate Wildlife Services.

The agency, opponents say, has not scientifically evaluated the consequences of its actions and has consistently understated the damage it does to "nontarget" species, like songbirds. Its work also undercuts other programs intended to protect the balance of natural ecosystems.

It is time the public got a clear picture of what Wildlife Services is up to, and time for the Department of Agriculture to bring the agency's work into accord with sound biological practices. Resolving wildlife conflicts need not involve indiscriminate killing.

To the Editor:

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